9

Saekisan

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The Angel Next Door Fan TL Release

The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten
Fan Translation
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The Angel Next Door Can't Release Me

Amane Fujimiya

A second-year high school student who lives next door to his girlfriend—an angel. The man, the myth, the legend. Knowing that his girlfriend's birthday is just around the corner, he begins preparing the best celebration he can.

Mahiru Shiina

A second-year high school student who lives next her beloved. She is a very hardworking, meticulous, yet sweet girl. Recently surprised her boyfriend with a birthday party. Loves Amane from the bottom of her heart.

The Angel Next Door Fan TL Release

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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Otonari no Tenshi-sama ni Itsunomanika Dame Ningen ni Sareteita Ken

Graphics: Indi

NOT FOR RESALE

The Angel Next Door
Spoils Me Rotten

Otonari no Tenshi-sama ni Itsunomanika Dame Ningen ni Sareteita Ken

Vol. 9 Fan Translation

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Chapter 1

What Lay Before Me When I Opened My Eyes

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

This must be heaven on Earth…

Just moments after waking up, this thought surged into Amane's mind, his senses still clouded from his slumber. The very first thing he saw upon opening his eyes was his beloved girlfriend. She was nestled comfortably in his arms, and her flowing, silky flaxen hair was softly tousled. As her carefully kept hair, which gleamed with a rich luster, draped over one of Amane's arms, she looked up at him with eyes reminiscent of precious gemstones, tucked snugly in his embrace.

Amane, still in a drowsy haze, felt confusion flicker through his mind for a moment as he registered Mahiru's presence beside him. He recalled the memory of her staying the night before—then it clicked. As it turned out, Mahiru didn't slip away immediately like she had during their previous sleepover. Instead, she'd decided to wait until Amane had roused from his sleep.

Mahiru realized right away that Amane had woken up, and wriggled a few times in his arms to find a pleasant position before turning to him with a shy smile. "Good morning, Amane-kun."

"…Morning. How long have you been awake?"

"Roughly ten minutes, I suppose. I thought it would be nice to enjoy this warmth while savoring the sight of your sleeping face before I start to prepare our breakfast."

"…Is it fun watching me sleep?"

"Yes, of course. It serves as my energy source, you know?" Mahiru's face beamed with satisfaction and spirit. "Thanks to you, I'm full of energy this morning," she added. Her words alone were enough to stir a flutter within

him, so Amane hugged her tightly in an attempt to mask the curious ticklish feeling.

Amane's sudden embrace had taken Mahiru by surprise, but she quickly relaxed before wrapping her arms around his back after he softly whispered, "Give me some energy, too." Considering that Mahiru was taking her time, it meant they still had plenty of time to spare. Amane enjoyed the moment, seizing the opportunity to relish her softness, her warmth, and her refreshingly sweet scent. Smiling at the sight, Mahiru joked, "Oh, are you indulging yourself again?"

Amane almost wanted to retort, *Just whose fault do you think that is?* But he decided against it, as the answer to that question was surely obvious to Mahiru. Without saying anything further, she let Amane snuggle up to her, allowing him to do as he pleased.

In his arms settled a beloved existence, one to whom he could swear with utmost certainty that he could dedicate his everything, and that she too would accept him in return.

I feel true happiness, from the bottom of my heart.

Amane allowed this boundless joy to permeate every fiber of his being, earnestly savoring the warmth he found reluctant to let go.

He was living such a merry morning that, without thinking, he almost let his eyes close once more. However, Mahiru noticed that his breathing had relaxed to a rate akin to sleep, and promptly patted his back in a gentle manner.

"Amane-kun, please don't fall back asleep."

"…The option to lie in bed and skip class is a tempting one."

"That doesn't sound like something an honor student such as yourself should say."

Amane couldn't help but chuckle at Mahiru's teasing whisper as he reflected on those words. He may have uttered them, but both Amane and Mahiru were seen as disciplined students, with no records of being tardy or absent at school. That being said, the situation at hand was so tempting that it seemed capable of bending even their diligent personalities.

"Do you really want to stay in bed that badly? Could this be the magic of the futon?" Mahiru joked.

“It’s more like *your* magic, I’d say.” Mahiru’s presence proved much more tempting to Amane than that of the futon, which suggested that if they weren’t careful, they might end up skipping school, sacrificing Mahiru’s attendance as well.

Mahiru, who was becoming more and more of a temptation for Amane to fall back asleep, let out a sigh not of scolding, but of equal parts amazement and embarrassment at Amane’s reply. “Geez.” Then, she finally began to shift herself, moving to slip out of his arms.

“Then, if I move away, you’ll be freed from this magic spell. Come on, get up and get dressed.”

“…I know I need to, but still…”

“I won’t spoil you when it comes to everything, you know. Come on, get up, wash your face, and freshen yourself up.” While Mahiru readily indulged him when the time was appropriate, she was firm about switching gears. Easily anticipating Amane’s attempt to wrap himself up in the futon, she playfully snatched the blanket away from him.

Amane was going to get up even without Mahiru’s urging, but seeing her rousing him so cheerfully, he smiled in a way that wouldn’t catch her attention.

In the future, this certainly wouldn’t be a bad way to wake up.

For the record, Amane was fully capable of waking up on time if he really intended to, but he couldn’t help thinking it was nice to fool around like this, as long as it didn’t trouble Mahiru. He didn’t want to make mischief, but he believed it was acceptable to rely on her and act a bit spoiled from time to time seeing as Mahiru seemed to enjoy taking care of him.

As Amane thought that, a chill spread across his body. He got out of bed and started to take out clothes to change into. The moment he opened the closet, Mahiru’s demeanor shifted, and a sudden tension lingered in the air. This prompted Amane to stifle a laugh with his hands over his mouth. His shoulders shook visibly.

“How should we change?” he then asked. “Should I go to the bathroom first?”

“…Please do. But you mustn’t peek.”

“As if I’d peek. Don’t you think that’s something we’d have to ask permission for?”

They may be dating, but Amane didn’t consider actually watching her change. That would be an invasion of privacy, and after all, their current feelings of embarrassment were much stronger than before. For Amane, seeing Mahiru change wouldn’t be much of an issue beyond *her* feeling embarrassed and shrinking away. However, the same couldn’t be said for Mahiru. It was clear that they wouldn’t be able to look each other in the eyes for a while, and they both might feel like dying from mutual embarrassment after.

“D-Do you want to see?”

“…I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to. But I don’t want to do anything that might upset you, and it’d be a bit of a problem to get too excited so early in the morning.

“Y-You’re right, but…”

“Yeah, so let’s not go there. It’s not always right to expose every little thing about each other.”

This went without saying, but Amane *was* curious. However, he knew better than to act on said curiosity at the moment. He believed that such private matters should only be shared after establishing genuine consent, and certainly not first thing in the morning on a school day.

“That much I can say for certain.” Amane shrugged his shoulders and was about to leave the room when Mahiru returned in a slightly exasperated voice back, “That’s one of your strengths, yet also a cause of frustration, Amane-kun.”

✧ + ✦ + ✧

After changing, as Mahiru had said she would prepare the day before, Amane enjoyed a solid breakfast consisting of dashimaki tamago, Kyoto-style salmon, a few pre-made side dishes, miso soup, and white rice. Once finished, he focused on getting ready for school by making himself look presentable.

Since he had already prepared his textbooks and other items the day before, all he had to do was tie his necktie and put on his blazer, but he paused with the tie in hand, lost in thought for a moment.

"Is something the matter?" Noticing Amane's contemplative pause, Mahiru approached him with a curious voice. Amane, although feeling a tad hesitant, extended the necktie he was holding along with a tie pin he had kept hidden towards Mahiru.

It was his birthday present—the tie pin she had given him the day before. He wanted Mahiru—the person who gave it to him—to be the one to put it on him for the first time.

"Could you tie my tie for me?"

When he asked timidly, Mahiru blinked in surprise, but soon understood his intention and smiled brightly, nodding in agreement. "Okay," she said. Very respectfully, Mahiru took the tie and tie pin, then knelt in front of Amane, who was sitting on the sofa, to wrap the tie around his neck.

Although tying a tie on someone else should be different from doing it for oneself, Mahiru managed the task smoothly and quickly fastened Amane's tie without any hiccups. She then attached the beautiful flower-engraved tie pin to the tie with movements that could only be described as impressive and gracious.

Although Amane rarely wore tie pins outside of formal occasions, this one somehow felt just right—perhaps due to the fact that Mahiru had been the one to choose it for him.

"…Does it suit me?" wondered Amane.

"Of course. I picked it out especially for you, so naturally it suits you."

Seeing Mahiru smile with unwavering confidence, Amane's cheeks naturally softened into a smile as well. "You have a good eye for this kind of stuff, so if you say it suits me I can rest easy."

"It's perfect," Mahiru assured. "Paying attention to accessories is also crucial to being fashionable."

"I just wanted to know if the present you gave me suited me, not necessarily if it was fashionable."

"Rest assured, it certainly suits you."

While Mahiru had a tendency to view Amane through rose colored glasses, she always tried to offer an objective perspective when it came to matters of appearance, so there didn't seem to be any issues on that front. As the tie pin was barely visible beneath the lapel of his blazer, it may only make a subtle difference, but such fine touches to one's attire were truly crucial in elevating one's appearance.

Amane naturally straightened his back, as wearing something chosen by Mahiru brought him incredible joy. It was possible that his desire to seem worthy of standing by her side had influenced him greatly.

Feeling the gift from Mahiru, pinned close to his heart, Amane experienced a gush of happiness and newfound confidence surge from within him, this time even stronger than before.

"…Truly, you become so strikingly handsome when you look confident that it genuinely catches me off guard, Amane-kun." Mahiru muttered quietly as Amane adjusted his shirt and donned his blazer.

"And when I don't look confident?"

"You look more on the cute side, I would say. Still handsome, though."

"Well, there are plenty of things I want to say about that, but it doesn't matter. I'm handsome now, right?"

"Yes, very much so."

"…To the point where standing next to you wouldn't be a problem?"

Amane wouldn't hesitate when it came to standing by her side. However, he occasionally wondered if he looked out of place in that position. Regardless of what others may think, he had no intention of leaving her side, but it would be impossible to claim that he wasn't concerned about how he was being perceived.

He had continued to work on improving himself, but whether those efforts were visibly paying off was another question. Amane, knowing Mahiru's answer but asking anyway, received a response filled with an indulgent smile. "Honestly, Amane-kun…" Mahiru then lovingly caressed his cheek. "Don't worry. You're handsome on the inside and the outside. I won't let anyone complain, but even ignoring my personal feelings, you're a wonderful person."

"I see. That's good then… Shall we head to school?"

"Yes."

As Amane stood up and extended his hand, Mahiru grasped it without any hesitation. Because Mahiru always offered him her genuine feelings, Amane could stand tall beside her and walk forward, holding her hand. It was thanks to her that he had managed to change himself to this extent.

I can't ever let go of her.

Vowing once again to never let her go and to always make her happy, Amane gave Mahiru a soft smile as they left the house together.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

"…From the looks of it, you must've really enjoyed yourself last night, eh?"

After parting ways with Mahiru, who'd apparently had some errands in the staff room, Amane entered the classroom only to be greeted by a grinning Itsuki. As Amane had expected, he'd instantly become the object of Itsuki's teasing at school, just one day after his birthday. Incidentally, it looked like Chitose hadn't arrived yet.

While it was nothing new, facing Itsuki's teasing in person brought on an even stronger bout of embarrassment than Amane had imagined, causing his eyebrows to naturally furrow reflexively. "Don't make it sound so suggestive. We just celebrated like one normally would."

"Sure, sure—whatever you say."

"Oh, come on…"

Itsuki noticed Amane's raised eyebrow and patted his shoulder with a knowing grin. "Just kidding, man. Anyway, it looks like Shiina-san's preparations went off without a hitch. I'm glad."

"Thanks for helping her out." Amane sighed, unable to bring himself to scold him, and instead let out a brief grunt.

"That said, I didn't really do much, though. If anything, Chi and Kido-san were the ones who did most of the work. They were the ones giving advice and helping out with everything."

"Even so, you went out of your way to keep it a secret, right? I'm really grateful."

“Well, a surprise is what makes it all the more special, don’tcha think? I’m glad you had a memorable birthday. Once again, Happy Birthday.” Itsuki, being the considerate friend he was, smiled and gave Amane a pat on the shoulder again.

“…Thanks.” Amane responded quietly. His cheeks, flushed with a mix of happiness and embarrassment, almost relaxed as he bit his lip.

Chitose isn’t here yet, so I’ll have to thank her later as well, Amane considered, given that she had offered plenty of advice to Mahiru. Chitose would almost certainly tease him for it, but it felt like a small price to pay for her kindness. Amane was ready to accept it graciously.

Savoring the simple joy of having friends who were willing to celebrate his birthday, Amane let out a sigh, which seemed to attract the attention of classmates who had apparently been listening in.

“Huh? It was Fujimiya-kun’s birthday?” a girl in class called out.

“Yep, yep—it was yesterday, actually.” When Itsuki confirmed it, their classmates exclaimed in a somewhat loud voice, “*Really?!*” and turned to look their way.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” the same girl reacted. “Shiina-san and everyone else didn’t mention anything about it, so I had no clue!”

“U–Uh, well, it was meant to be kind of a surprise and stuff, so…” Amane muttered.

“Oh, gotcha. But not telling us kinda sucks… Now I don’t have anything to give you today… Would juice be okay?”

“Then I’ll give you this candy,” one boy offered. “It’s a limited edition ‘enoki mushroom rice’ flavor.”

“That sounds nasty as hell… C’mon, don’t just dump it on him.”

“What was that?! More like *addictive* as hell! It’s so good!”

“Terrible taste, much?” retorted the girl.

“You’re so mean! Enoki mushroom rice is delicious!”

“I guess? It’s way too bitter. I wouldn’t say it’s a suitable flavor for candy to begin with.”

“Your logical argument hurts both me *and* the company making it!”

Amane was left wholly and utterly bewildered as his classmates gathered around in droves, apparently having caught wind of their little

conversation. Itsuki smiled a little and whispered, “They’re nice people, aren’t they? Don’t think too hard—just accept them.”

Ever since Amane decided to change his behavior in front of everyone, he had felt a slight shift, bringing him a bit closer to his classmates... But this was the first time they had approached him so freely to celebrate, and it made his heart feel inexplicably warm. Had he remained shut away, avoiding interaction with others, he never would have been surrounded by people like this.

“…Um, thank you everyone. I’m really happy.” As he thanked them, unable to fully hide the embarrassment in his voice, the classmates around him broke into bright, genuine smiles, prompting Amane to mutter “Thanks,” once again, a bit more softly.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

“…It seems that Amane-kun has become quite popular in the short time I was away.”

Having finished her errands and returned to the classroom, Mahiru saw Amane being surrounded by his classmates. She looked amazed yet happy at the sight. Her surprise was understandable, given that seeing Amane at the center of attention wasn’t exactly an everyday occurrence. Yet, what truly captivated her was not his sudden surge in popularity, but rather the warmth enveloping her heart as she observed their classmates celebrating him.

“Ah—good morning, Shiina-san! And don’t you worry, we won’t steal Fujimiya-kun away from you or anything!”

“I—I wasn’t worried about that. I was simply surprised to see him surrounded by everyone.”

“True, the only other time Amane was surrounded like this was when he announced his relationship with Mahirun. I’m surprised too.” Chitose, who had entered the classroom with her, was also astonished to see the commotion surrounding Amane, her eyes widening. When her eyes met Amane’s, she flashed him a playful smirk. “If the old you saw this, he’d be gobsmacked.”

“Well, I do believe I’d have been speechless.” Amane himself acknowledged that his former self carried a gloomy aura, which was worlds apart from the person he had become. The old him might have found the person he was now difficult to deal with. That didn’t mean, however, that Amane disliked who he had become.

He had learned to put in the effort to stand beside the person he cherished most, and although he wouldn’t say he’d stopped belittling himself entirely, he did so less often. Perhaps the most accurate way to put it was that gaining confidence had given him peace of mind.

Having experienced firsthand how love could influence a person, Amane looked back on his past self with a blend of embarrassment, bitterness, and a touch of nostalgia. Swallowing those feelings, he simply smiled weakly.

Chitose, bubbling with excitement, exclaimed, “You’ve become so much more open than before, haven’t you? You’re a prime example of how falling in love can change someone.”

“Shut up. Is that a problem?”

“Nope! I think it’s a good thing, really. Not that you were bad before, but you look much happier now. You smile way more,” Chitose said, poking her cheeks with her index fingers to emphasize her point, causing Amane to instinctively touch his own cheeks.

Glancing at Mahiru, he saw her nodding with a tender smile, as if the shock had already worn off. “Also, your smile is much gentler than before. Isn’t that right?” Mahiru asked.

“Exactly!” one girl agreed. “The look in your eyes is totally different. It’s not as obvious as when you look at Shiina-san, though.”

“Well, obviously he’d be totally smitten when it comes to Shiina-san. Just look at how much he adores her.”

“It’s gotten to the point where lately, you look like you might even be more smitten than the Angel herself,” another claimed.

“…I get it, so please don’t look too much,” Amane urged. “I’m aware that I’m sweet to Mahiru.”

Amane was careful not to let his guard down and reveal too relaxed of an expression around Mahiru, though it looked as though his classmates had already noticed his tendency to soften up when they were together. Voices of agreement could be heard around them from both male and female classmates.

Amane felt a renewed sense of embarrassment welling up from within and a ticklish sensation around his lips. Sensing this, Chitose clapped her hands to change the mood, saying, “Anyway, we should probably leave it at that before Amane starts sulking.”

She shouldn’t have started it then, Amane reasoned, but he also understood that she had her own unique way of celebrating him.

With a slight smile, Chitose pulled out a wrapped box from her bag. “So, even though it’s a day late, here’s a present from me and Ikkun!”

“…Really, thank you so much for being considerate and going through all this trouble with Mahiru.”

“*Heh heh heh*. Well, I am Mahirun’s one and only best friend, you see~. I’m always ready to get on board with my adorable friend’s schemes and plots. Here you go!” Chitose handed the surprisingly heavy box to Amane with a burst of excitement in her voice.

If Itsuki and Chitose had chosen the present together, it probably wasn’t one that missed the mark. While Amane hoped that it wasn’t something too silly or nonsensical considering the timing, he would be grateful to receive anything from them, unless it was utterly outrageous.

The pair had great taste, so Amane wasn’t worried about their choice of gift, but the unexpected weight made him look at it with curiosity. *What could it be?*

"…Just asking, but what's inside?"

"Aw, you're asking that *now*? I mean, I could tell you, but…"

A wave of unease washed over Amane as he glanced over at Mahiru for a moment. "Hey, what's with that suggestive response?"

"Aha ha. Just kidding, just kidding. It's nothing dangerous—it's a set of bathing powder and bath salts. Some with scents that Mahirun likes and some that are perfect for metabolism, according to the reviews. I thought maybe the two of you could use them."

"…Why are you assuming we'll be using them together? Normally, you'd use them on your own." Amane appreciated the gift, but her unnecessary comment caused him to frown.

While they had some level of physical intimacy, their relationship was a pure one. Amane didn't want them to be known as a couple who often bathed together. Not that they hadn't bathed together before, but it was always with swimsuits or towels. Plus, it wasn't as though they bathed together each and every time Mahiru stayed over.

"Others will get the wrong idea," said Amane, frowning, to which Chitose replied with a dissatisfied "*Awww*…" in a way that made him want to pinch her cheeks, but he managed to refrain.

"Don't say anything that people might misunderstand," Amane repeated.

"This is what you call being a wimp."

"Itsuki, be quiet."

"Yeah, yeah, sure thing… Though even if I don't keep quiet, I feel like everyone already knows you two are getting pretty hot and heavy… Ow, okay, I get it."

Amane pressed his fist into Itsuki's waist as he walked over, the plain, hard sensation that returned made him feel a slight sense of defeat. However, having successfully silenced Itsuki, Amane let out a deep sigh.

"I genuinely appreciate the gift and the thought both of you put into it, but please, don't say anything you shouldn't." While saying this, Amane somehow managed to keep his cheeks from burning up with shame as he returned to his seat with the present held carefully in his hands.

Itsuki followed, placing a hand on his waist in an exaggerated manner. “Say, Amane…” Once away from the group of classmates, Itsuki leaned in close to Amane’s ear.

“What?”

“Nobody said anything about you having to bathe together. The assumption was that you’d take turns if one of you stayed over…”

“…*Shut*.”

“I whispered that super quietly, though!?”

Amane, realizing all too late that he’d shot himself in the foot, bit his lip and turned away, while Itsuki laughed and slapped Amane on the back to tease him.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

“Oh, did Shiina-san let the cat out of the bag?”

At lunchtime, Amane extended his thanks to Ayaka for helping Mahiru, and she returned a mischievous smile to him. Without giving it away, Ayaka had secretly collaborated with Mahiru to orchestrate Mahiru’s surprise celebration, which Amane was grateful for. Though at the same time, he also felt slightly deceived. Ayaka’s silence meant that Souji was in on it, implying that the whole event had been kept secret by everyone taking part.

This level of collaboration was undoubtedly thanks to Mahiru’s popularity. While Amane couldn’t help but admire her influence, he inwardly questioned the necessity of such an elaborate plan. Naturally, Mahiru’s desire to surprise Amane must have been the main motivation.

“Did you figure out the secret ingredient yourself?”

“Pretty much. I just kinda thought it tasted similar, that’s all.”

“So it was easy to tell, after all. Maybe the coffee at my aunt’s place is just that delicious.”

“…By the way, what made you suggest coffee to Mahiru?”

“Oh, Shiina-san was having trouble deciding on the cake, so while we rummaged through recipe books and magazines together, I suggested

putting coffee in it. Then she got on board with the idea. It was a great suggestion, if I do say so myself," Ayaka smiled.

While Amane wore a bitter smile, he had to agree that it was delicious, so he simply nodded.

"From the looks of it, you were quite satisfied with the result, so all's well that ends well. I'm sure Aunt Fumika will be thrilled."

"…I'm truly grateful for the owner's help, but do we have to give her *all* the details?"

Expressing his thanks for her help was the natural thing to do. Though he still couldn't shake this feeling of unease given her lively nature, Amane believed that sharing some of what happened with Fumika was unavoidable. Given her first impression however, the thought of dealing with her boundless excitement was a daunting one.

Ayaka seemed to have caught on to Amane's point, giving a slightly wry smile and murmuring, "W-Well, I think just a brief explanation would do. My Auntie isn't the type to pry too much…*probably*."

That 'probably' only succeeded in fueling Amane's anxiety, but considering that Fumika wasn't a bad person at heart, and that the conversation would serve as great sustenance for her, he figured it would be okay. As long as it was in moderation, that is.

"Anyhow, thank you so much. For going to such lengths for someone like me…though Mahiru would get angry if I said that. Thanks."

"Not at all~. Helping out for a friend's birthday is the natural thing to do. So, here's something from me as well."

Ayaka then pulled a somewhat large, wrapped box from her backpack. It was just slightly too big to hold with one hand. Amane was swiftly taken aback as he hadn't expected to receive anything from her. "Looks like my surprise was a success too!" Her cheerful declaration snapped him back to reality.

"Here, this is from me and Sou-chan. Please accept it."

"You didn't have to go to all this trouble, but…thank you. Can I ask what's inside?"

"Protein!"

"No changes there, huh."

Her energetic response led Amane to chuckle and accept the gift. Ayaka then proudly exclaimed, “That one’s really tasty and has a great absorption rate! It’s even Sou-chan approved!” while showing off a smug face, which made Amane laugh even harder.

Had Souji been with them, Amane could imagine him retorting “Don’t use me as your guinea pig,” with an exasperated look on his face.

Realizing what Amane was thinking, Ayaka smiled brightly and added, “Rest assured, Sou-chan said ‘Well, protein is protein, so I’m sure it’s fine,’ when he had a bunch! We tested them thoroughly, so don’t be shy!” She maintained her cheerful smile.

Sounds just like a shady lab experiment to me, Amane thought, but after seeing Ayaka’s unexpectedly radiant smile, he decided to keep his thoughts to himself. Sometimes, holding one’s tongue was the way to go.

“At any rate, thanks for everything you’ve done. You have been a huge help, Kido.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I’m meddling because I want to, and actually, Sou-chan’s also told me to keep my meddling in moderation.”

“I don’t think you’re meddling. You’ve genuinely helped us out a bunch.”

“Hmm, but only because I wanted to, so you shouldn’t worry too much, Fujimiya-kun. Plus, there’s something in it for me as well.”

“Like what?”

“Heh heh heh… If you get along well with Sou-chan, then he will be in a better mood. And when he’s in a good mood, I get to spend even more time touching his muscles.”

“…I see.”

Although Amane smiled wryly at Ayaka’s mischievous and self-serving motives, there was more to her than meets the eye, which was a quality that anyone familiar with her could tell. Her natural inclination to care for others was evident even from Amane’s limited interactions with her, and it seemed that she genuinely enjoyed doing so.

Moreover, she had a habit of playing her help down, urging Amane not to worry about returning any favors. Thus, after thanking her for her consideration, Amane shrugged and said, “Well, as long as you and Kayano are okay with that, then I guess it’s fine.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

“Today was amazing, wasn’t it?”

After they returned home and finished dinner, Mahiru murmured this in a soft tone as they relaxed on the sofa together.

Amane understood exactly what she was referring to and responded, “Yeah.”

Mahiru then relaxed her cheeks out of pure joy, as if she herself was the one being celebrated. Relief, satisfaction, and delight. Her expression showed a delicate combination of such emotions as she smiled at Amane, making him feel unbearably shy to the point of inadvertently shifting his gaze to the TV.

Laid out on the coffee table between the sofa and the TV were a number of presents that he’d received from his friends. Starting with the gifts from Itsuki, Chitose, and Ayaka, he also received some from classmates with whom he hadn’t been particularly close to, that were given to him in the moment’s excitement. They consisted mostly of snacks and drinks, but Amane felt both shy and joyful to receive the blessings from his friends despite trying his hardest not to let it show. Last year, there wasn’t any kind of commotion in class as he had only told Itsuki and Chitose about his birthday, so in comparison, the celebration he received this year felt almost surreal.

As someone who would typically consider himself to be indifferent, Amane hadn’t particularly longed for such a grand celebration. Yet, he couldn’t help but feel genuinely happy to receive such birthday wishes.

“…I wasn’t expecting everyone to congratulate me that much. Though I did pass on that enoki mushroom rice flavored candy.”

Mahiru giggled. “I was slightly curious about it, personally.”

“You’d probably need something to cleanse your palate after, that’s for sure.”

Mahiru, with her stronger thirst for culinary knowledge, was more fascinated in obscure exotic snacks than Amane was. While Amane

appreciated the gesture, he was less adventurous with his palate, politely declining the more unusual treats. As if to make up for it, he was instead given a beef stew flavored candy, which looked suspiciously like a concentrated bouillon cube. Perhaps his classmate was a true connoisseur of these eccentric choices of treats.

Puzzled yet slightly amused by the unexpected hobby of a classmate he hadn't spoken to frequently, Amane took a look at all the gifts given to him by his friends and classmates. He felt a genuine sense of happiness, but a creeping sense of doubt and faint anxiety began to overshadow his joy.

"…Is it really okay for everyone to celebrate me so much?" Amane's words slipped out unexpectedly.

Mahiru's gentle expression quickly shifted, replaced by a mix of annoyance and unease, looking at him with a faint pout. "Why do you seem so worried? The reason why our classmates all congratulated you is because you've managed to interact and form friendships with them. It's all a result of your own merit, Amane-kun. Do you understand?"

"Sorry, sorry. I'm not trying to put myself down or anything. Somehow, it just didn't feel real to me. That's all. I usually don't tell people about my birthday."

Amane felt as though he was pressuring people that he wasn't particularly close with to congratulate him on his birthday without any sort of lead-up or advance notice. He was perfectly happy receiving just a few words from those he was closest to.

There's way more people than before, so you can't blame me for being surprised, was the message that Amane was trying to convey.

"Hehe, that just proves how you're recognized and blessed by those around you, Amane-kun. It's something to feel joyful about."

"Yeah, I hope so."

"Amane-kun." Mahiru countered with a disapproving voice, which caused Amane to break into a smile. Faced with her look so stern it urged, *You mustn't belittle yourself*, it would be impossible for him to remain mired in negativity.

"Sorry, sorry—I know… I am happy."

“Yes… Please, accept their congratulations sincerely.” Mahiru leaned on his upper arm with her usual smile, and feeling the slight pressure and weight, he relaxed his cheeks and glanced down at Mahiru. Her happiness for his birthday celebration was entirely genuine, even acting as though it were her own special day. This led him to believe her joy was truly heartfelt.

…So, in reality, Mahiru does see birthdays as events meant to be celebrated.

In fact, this held especially true if the birthday belonged to a close friend or someone dear to her. Even if it was for an individual that she wasn’t too familiar with, Mahiru would still offer her sincere congratulations. Even so, when he recalled how Mahiru’s birthday last year came and went without a party, a cold, sharp thorn pricked into the warm and fuzzy feelings that had accumulated in his heart throughout the course of the day. But—it was a thorny reminder that he didn’t exactly hate. It was a warning urging him to reevaluate the reality of the situation, and it doubled as a catalyst to push him forward and ask Mahiru a certain question.

“Say…”

“Yes?”

Amane had intended to call out with a voice as smooth as he could manage, buffed of any spikes or rough edges, but Mahiru, having sensed the subtle change in his voice, stopped leaning on him and straightened her back. Mahiru braced herself, not out of caution but perhaps in anticipation of an important discussion.

Amane cleared his throat. “You know, um, I’m not the best at keeping secrets, so you might notice things or become suspicious of me if I try to hide stuff—and it’d be bad for me if you found out and weren’t happy about it. So, I thought I’d let you know in advance instead.”

“What is it?”

“Your birthday’s next month, right?”

“Ah…yes, now that you mention it.” Mahiru looked surprised as if it had just occurred to her. Then, after several moments of contemplation, she nodded. Judging by her late reaction, she was completely oblivious to its arrival, seeing it purely as an event that was of no interest to her. It didn’t even catch onto the edges of her thoughts, leading to her delayed response.

Amane sensed an overwhelming indifference toward herself, which he found hard to watch. “For you, having your birthday celebrated isn’t really a pleasant feeling, is it?”

“It’s not so much that I find it unpleasant…it’s more like I’m utterly indifferent to it.”

Just as Mahiru claimed, she never cared much about her own birthday. This was something Amane had known since her last birthday, but hearing it stated so bluntly, even after they’d begun dating, still brought him a pang of melancholy.

“To me, it’s simply a day that marks growing a year older, not a day for celebration. I’ve hardly ever celebrated it,” Mahiru explained. “Ah— But I was happy when you celebrated it last year! It’s not that I’m indifferent to people celebrating that day—it’s more like I can’t bring myself to care about my own matters.” She waved her hand in the air in acknowledgement. The little celebration she had last year was still fresh in her mind.

Realizing that he had made her worry, Amane felt slightly guilty and apologized. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you say all that. I understand that to you, that day isn’t particularly special.”

Mahiru’s upbringing and the environment in which she grew up, which Amane was well aware of, made it clear why her own birthday held no significance for her. As far as he could tell, Mahiru was no longer pained by her past. But for Amane, that alone wasn’t sufficient.

Even if this was his ego speaking, Amane wished for Mahiru to feel as though she was truly loved, that she deserved nothing but happiness, and that her birth was an event worth celebrating.

“Um, this might just be my selfishness talking…but to me, your birthday is a very special day.”

“Special…”

“Just like you consider my birthday to be special, I also consider your birthday to be more special than anyone else’s.”

Amane had heard from multiple people that Mahiru had gone to great lengths to prepare for his birthday. He also knew that her love for him was deep and sincere, coming from the bottom of her heart. He didn’t want to become someone who simply sat back and relished her love. Amane strived

to return the same amount of love—if not more—for everything she had given him.

"Mahiru, I'm so in love with you that I don't know what to do. I'm so grateful, and overjoyed, that you were born into this world, and I will forever be filled with gratitude. In my mind, I'm always thanking you for being born, for meeting me, and for falling in love with me… To me, the day you were born is an incredibly special day."

Without question, Mahiru was the light of Amane's life. The day she came into this world was an extraordinarily special one, and he wanted nothing more than for her to realize this.

"So, uh—if you don't find it unpleasant, may I also celebrate your birthday? Just like you had celebrated mine? May I, from the depths of my heart, express my sincerest gratitude for you being born into this world?"

Amane wasn't going to insist on a celebration without considering her own wishes on the matter. Should she feel uncomfortable with the idea, he was perfectly content to treat the day just like any other. If she preferred to spend the day quietly, Amane was ready to drop the topic and continue their daily life as normal. However, if she was on board with the idea, Amane was determined to celebrate the best he could by utilizing all the resources at his disposal. He wanted to convey that there were people around her who were grateful for her birth.

Still staring straight at her, Amane waited for Mahiru to answer after posing that question. Immediately after, he noticed a change in her expression different from just moments before—one of surprise. A hint of uncertainty and fear flickered in her eyes… She looked at Amane with disbelief.

"…Are you sure?" she asked.

"You aren't against it?" Amane returned.

"No no, not at all. Umm, I'm very happy. It's just, to think someone like me would…"

"Mahiru, remember before? Didn't you look at me like you didn't want me belittling myself? It's not good to then go and do that very same thing yourself, you know." Without restraint, Amane spontaneously grabbed Mahiru's cheeks—a show of her bewilderment, uncertainty, and

anxiety—before giving them a good pull. Teasingly playing with her cheeks, which were neither too squishy nor mushy in their softness, Amane sought to gently dispel any negative feelings that might be sinking into her heart. Then, a truly silly sound, "Owkay, I—I undewstand…" spilled from her mouth, which couldn't quite close all the way.

Although Amane was careful to avoid causing pain, it still must have been somewhat shocking to Mahiru, as she continued to look at him with a dazed expression even after he let go. When he asked, "Do you realize how much you mean to me now?" the color in her face began to subside, suggesting that him playing with her cheeks was not the sole reason for her surprise.

She murmured soft, yet wordless "*Ah…*"'s and "*Uuu…*"'s from under her breath, and then, hesitantly, she looked up to face Amane. The shadow of anxiety had all but vanished from her expression.

"…Thank you so much. Just having my birthday celebrated by you, Amane-kun, fills me with happiness… It's a strange feeling. I've always believed that my birthday was of no importance at all."

"Then, from this year onwards, I'll make sure that you'll no longer have any reason to continue believing that."

Mahiru's indifference was likely rooted in the complicated relationship she had with her parents. This was an aspect of her that Amane could never completely erase, nor did he want to. It was part of what shaped Mahiru into the person she was today.

If nothing else, it was crystal clear that this indifference stemmed from a vulnerable place within her—one that she didn't want others to touch. Therefore, Amane wanted to overwrite this seemingly dismissive apathy. He wanted to make her feel that she had people who cherished her, and were grateful for her existence.

"Hosting a massive party with everyone…isn't really your style, is it, Mahiru? Let's celebrate it peacefully, together."

"…Okay."

Although sociable, Mahiru was also a naturally shy—or more accurately, wary—girl, and as such, preferred a quiet environment even during her birthday. As she preferred not to make her birthday known to many, Amane felt that celebrating it in private would be a better idea. It appeared that, now, Mahiru wasn't averse to letting her close friends know about her upcoming birthday. A conversation with her and the ever eager Chitose could be a great way to explore potential ways to celebrate.

As Amane was slowly yet surely planning future arrangements, he noticed Mahiru looking at him intently. She appeared to be slightly embarrassed and uncomfortable, yet still visibly happy as she shrunk herself into a ball.

Amane couldn't help but let out a small laugh. "You really aren't used to having a party thrown for you, are you, Mahiru? We've barely even planned anything yet."

"I-I know, but…"

"Well, I'm glad that you don't seem to mind the idea… So, that means I'll be moving behind the scenes to prepare a party for you. Please let me off the hook just this once."

Mahiru giggled. "*Okay*~."

Having already discussed about him celebrating her birthday, Amane felt it would only be fair to straightforwardly announce his intention to make arrangements in secret. He figured that Mahiru would pick up on this the moment he mentioned her birthday, but given that he wanted to avoid causing any possible anxiety about the celebration, he decided to request

permission for his inevitable ‘suspicious behavior’. In response, Mahiru began to giggle happily.

Mahiru’s light smile and bright voice brought with it a sense of relief for Amane, and he began to stroke her head as she leaned into his touch with slight neediness.

“I’ll do my best to make you as happy as possible. I’ll also put effort into researching things from various angles and viewpoints.”

“And you let all this slip in front of the person herself?”

“*Ah*—”

“Hehe. Honestly, you can be so careless at times.”

“I can’t argue with you there. You hit the nail on the head.”

At this, Mahiru chuckled, her laughter ringing out soft and melodiously. “I shall look forward to it.”

“Sure. I’ll do my best to meet your expectations.”

“Okay. In that case, I will be waiting eagerly.”

Seeing that Mahiru, who had previously been indifferent, was now excited for her birthday to arrive, made Amane more pleased than anything else. With a firm nod, he had resolved then and there to make the remaining month unforgettable for her.

Chapter 2

Laying the Groundwork for the Celebration

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"Ohh… Come to think of it, it was around this time last year when you came to me looking for advice for Shiina-san's birthday, right?"

Knowing that he couldn't make Mahiru's birthday an unforgettable one on his own, Amane caught Itsuki, his closest confidant, after school. Since neither of them had shifts at their respective part-time jobs today, they had decided to hold a meeting at a fast-food restaurant. Amane wasn't one to haphazardly talk to people about Mahiru's birthday, but since Itsuki had helped him out last year and had a rough date in his mind already, Amane didn't hesitate to reach out to him.

"I don't think Mahiru wants people to know when it is, so don't spread it around."

"I know, I know. Who do you take me for?" Perhaps because it was a slow time of day for business, their fries were stale and soggy. Itsuki, who had picked one up and wiggled it around, narrowed his eyes in a show of exasperation. "I know Shiina-san's way more cautious than you are, Amane. If anything, she dislikes others…well, not really. It's more that she's particular. She probably only reveals her personal details to the people she likes."

"…You understand her well."

"Don't glare at me—it's scary. There's *no* need for the jealousy, man. If you think about it, like, she's similar to Yuuta and I in that way, isn't she?"

"Ahhh… Well, I do see the resemblance."

Although of different nature from Mahiru, both Itsuki and Yuuta had a tendency to present a friendly facade while maintaining an invisible barrier between themselves and others. Beneath his signature light-hearted

attitude and gestures, Itsuki never revealed his inner thoughts, which was a facet of him that Amane knew very well. In Yuuta's case, preserving a gentle expression served to shield himself from the scrutiny his position invited, letting him avoid drawing attention to any strong emotions he might experience.

"Right? So it's easy to tell what she'd dislike. I'm not some kind of petty guy who'd go out of their way to bother a friend's girlfriend."

"I know that."

"Wow! I can feel the trust you have in me!"

"You just noticed that now?"

This should have been no surprise, especially considering the fact that Amane would never have consulted Itsuki if he didn't trust him. For some reason, however, Itsuki directed him a look of utter astonishment, his expression even screaming, *I'm so surprised!*

As always, he's so over the top, Amane thought. As he gazed at the theatrical Itsuki, he noticed a look of bewilderment flash across his face, which then settled into one of mild concern. It appeared that Itsuki was worried about him. Sensing this, Amane asked, "What?" in a tone a few notches deeper than usual.

"…Why the sudden honesty? You're making me worried," Itsuki replied. "Be honest now, what's the matter?"

"Quit looking at me like I'm sick!" Amane retorted.

"Yeeaah, well, I mean…."

"*Right~?*"

Amane, having felt somewhat offended by Itsuki's inscrutable look, glared at him. However, their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of another person who seemed to be on the same page as Itsuki. Curious, Amane looked up to see who had joined them.

As he expected, there stood Chitose. A slight smirk danced along her typical charming smile.

"…You just casually joined us, huh," Amane said.

"Weeell, seeing as I just happened to spot you two sneaking around, I figured I'd join too," Chitose explained.

Amane was aware that Chitose had left school earlier to run some

errands, so her sudden appearance took him by surprise. He glanced at her with a suspicious look.

Chitose being Chitose, she clarified, “I wasn’t stalking you guys or anything, y’know?” grinning all the while. She nonchalantly sat in the chair next to Itsuki, picked up a fry, and tossed it into her mouth.

“So, what were you on about?” she asked.

“Making yourself comfortable, huh,” commented Amane.

“Wouldn’t you have chosen a different place if it was something you’d rather I not overhear? Ikkun already let me know he was going to have a guy’s day out, and since he knows that I always pass through this way, you must’ve initiated things today, right, Amane? And besides, whenever you ask for advice, eight—no, *nine* times out of ten, it’s about Mahirun, isn’t it?”

Realizing that Chitose was incredibly sharp when it came to the strangest details, Amane had the urge to clutch his head in his hands. Despite this, Amane knew that she, much like Itsuki, had a vague idea of when Mahiru’s birthday was and had already planned to ask her for help, which meant that her arrival actually saved him the hassle of explaining twice. Be that as it may, being read like a book by her made him feel somewhat embarrassed, so he let out a quiet sigh to release the awkward, itchy feeling swirling inside his chest.

Having no intention to hide it from her, Amane declared, “…We were talking about Mahiru’s birthday.”

“*Seeee?*” Chitose said with a smug grin. “Okay, okay; I see, I see; gotcha, gotcha. So you wanna make it a surprise.”

“Well, not a surprise exactly… I’ve already gotten her permission to celebrate it.”

“That’s really considerate of you.”

“I want to be cautious, respectful, and supportive when it comes to Mahiru.”

Amane knew that surprises could sometimes backfire, depending on the situation. The whole point of this celebration was to make Mahiru happy, so the idea of accidentally causing the opposite was something he wanted to avoid at all costs. Mahiru had her own thoughts about her birthday, which made him even more cautious.

As a result, Amane wanted to cater as much as possible to Mahiru's preferences. He strived to host a birthday that she could genuinely appreciate and value.

"*Nfufu,* love struck much?" Chitose teased.

"Shove it. Say whatever you want."

"**Whistle*~* You're totally smitten! *So* sweet and madly in love~."

"Itsuki, shut her up."

"Guess I've no choice. Here—take these!"

Amane, knowing that letting Chitose run wild would only make her more unbearable, asked her boyfriend for assistance. Itsuki, heaving an exaggerated shrug, playfully stuffed a handful of fries into Chitose's mouth to keep her quiet. Of course, she couldn't speak properly with a mouthful of fries. Amane decided to pay no heed to the muffled grumbles coming from her throat despite the piercing glare she sent him.

After chewing for a while, Chitose finally swallowed and immediately complained. “Geez…” Amane once again chose to remain silent.

“So, what were you going to ask Ikkun for?”

“Oh, uh, it’s not like I was going to ask him a favor… I just haven’t decided on a present yet, so I wanted to discuss some ideas with him.”

First and foremost, they had to decide on and then prepare a present. As it might take a while to arrange everything, Amane couldn’t deny the nagging feeling that he was already one step behind in preparing Mahiru’s birthday gift.

Despite his hands being full getting used to his part-time job, Amane still regretted not starting his preparations sooner.

“Hmm, but wouldn’t you know her best? You’re closest to her.”

“You’re her boyfriend. Aren’t you together pretty much 24/7?”

“24/7 is pushing it, even for us,” Amane replied. “But that aside, yeah, you’re right. It’s just that Mahiru isn’t really materialistic… If something catches her eye, she’ll carefully weigh the benefits and drawbacks before buying it…”

“Ahh… Yeah, Mahirun does have that kind of mindset,” Chitose agreed, a slight edge of disbelief in her voice. As a fellow woman and shopping buddy, she absolutely understood where Amane was coming from. “She never tells others about what she wants and instead tries to get things on her own. She might say something when it’s for you, Amane, but she rarely says anything when it’s for herself.”

Mahiru, you don’t have to make everything about me, you know… Amane frowned. As her boyfriend, learning about Mahiru’s feelings from a new angle left Amane feeling both pleased, and frustrated by her modesty.

“Well, these are all reasons why there isn’t much Mahiru wants at the moment.”

“You gave her hand cream and a stuffed toy last year, right? Don’t you remember anything she said she wanted? Even just a rough idea?”

“Last year… Well, yeah, I guess she did mention something, but…”

Mahiru had in fact specified an item that she wanted. However…

“Huh? Then if you haven’t already, wouldn’t getting that make her happy? It’d solve everything at once, right?”

“I know she hasn’t bought one yet, but, uh, it’s just that…”

“Just what?”

“It’s a whetstone she wanted.”

““What?””

“A whetstone.”

Faced with a word so detached from the world of high school students, Itsuki and Chitose froze in unison. Their minds raced to figure out what this ‘whetstone’ word could have possibly meant.

Yeah, usually you wouldn’t expect a whetstone to come up there…

Unless you spent a lot of time cooking, whetstones would rarely come up as the topic of a conversation. Their confusion was understandable.

After thinking it over for a good five seconds, Chitose glanced over at him and moved her lips, clearly baffled. “That thingamajig you use every night to sharpen knives?”

“Not *every night*, but yeah, that’s the one.” Amane was certain that seeing someone silently sharpening a knife in the dead of night would startle anyone, himself included.

Amane had actually seen Mahiru using her whetstone before, and she’d even occasionally brought one over to his apartment to sharpen his knives. The way she honed the knives with a keen, focused gaze made him think of work carried out by professional craftsmen. Every time Amane saw this, he would look off into the distance, feeling as though it was a bit beyond what a typical high school girl would do.

*SFX: WHETSTONE

"…She must've focused on wanting something really practical." Chitose too gazed into the distance, perhaps envisioning the very same thing that caught Itsuki off guard, rendering him dumbfounded.

"She said at the time that whetstones are expensive, so she didn't need one right away. They last a lifetime, but she didn't feel an urgent need to buy a new one," Amane explained.

"…Shiina-san can be so bizarre sometimes."

"Well, Mahiru isn't like your average high school girl when it comes to stuff like this."

"On the other hand, Chi is pretty easy to figure out."

"Aha ha, hiya! Just your *average* high school girl here! I'm good with food, day to day items, or just stuff I can use. Oh, and maybe cosmetics too."

"But you'd feel awkward if I tried to give you some, wouldn't you?" Itsuki remarked.

"As a girl, it's nice to receive cosmetics from others, but it can be a bit of a gamble. They're hard to use if they choose the wrong color, and I don't want others to see me wearing a color that makes me look strange. Since I prefer to choose my cosmetics based on what I like, how it feels, and what I already have, getting them from others doesn't feel that ideal. It's a different story if they've already done their research and really understand what I want, though."

"Now I'm just even more worried about what to get her." Amane already knew that different colors suited different people. However, he was confronted with the fact that choosing a color for someone would be surprisingly tough. This was especially true for him, as he believed Mahiru would look stunning in anything. Since Mahiru had never expressed a desire for cosmetics, Amane hadn't done his homework on the topic. Seeing as Chitose hadn't brought up anything of the sort, it was unlikely that Mahiru had mentioned anything to Chitose either.

Amane didn't bother to conceal his disappointment as yet another potential gift idea quickly fell through.

Noticing his reaction, Chitose sighed. "I guess being naturally beautiful

has its downsides too. To be honest, I think Mahirun would be happy with anything you give her, but that's not really what you're going for, is it?"

"Yeah, that's the thing. I can say without a doubt in my mind that Mahiru would treasure anything I give her…but that's not what I want. She would only be happy and cherish the gift *because* she got it from me, not necessarily because she desired it deep down. This is a special occasion. I want to give Mahiru something that she would be truly glad to receive. If I do that, she would be twice as happy, right?"

Amane understood just how deeply Mahiru loved him. Without being conceited, he knew that she would be happy with almost anything he chose to give her. Thus, Amane wished to give her a gift she truly longed for, not one she would cherish solely because it was something he had gifted her. He wanted the value of the gift to be in the gift itself, not that he had been one to give it to her.

" …I feel your love runs deeper than the ocean."

"Challenger Deep kind of deep?"

"That's still the ocean," Amane retorted. "Also, don't tease me."

"Fair point. My apologies then."

After lightly scolding the couple who always seized the chance to tease him, Amane sighed as he dismissed a possible option for Mahiru's present.

"…So, yeah, that's why I'm still stuck on what to do," Amane began. "Like I said earlier, Mahiru doesn't really want material things. She doesn't even mention what she wants to me."

"Y'know, I've never seen Mahirun say she wants this or that. She only says 'This is nice, isn't it?' and even that doesn't necessarily mean it's something she wants, just that she has a good impression of it."

"Yeah, exactly. I'm kind of at a loss… Even when she goes out with you, a fellow woman, it's the same story. Being her boyfriend doesn't mean I can just probe into every little thing about her. And besides…if Mahiru finds something she really wants to buy…or feels like she needs to buy, then she just buys it herself right away."

By nature, Mahiru wasn't one to chase materialistic possessions. She was frugal, yet at the same time, was able to decisively purchase items if she deemed them necessary. Although Amane admired her ability to determine

what she truly needed, it made finding a present for her as her boyfriend quite the challenge.

"Ah… Right, while Mahirun doesn't buy things she doesn't need, when she does need something, she wastes no time getting it."

"Yeah, Shiina-san seems to be pretty firm about that. Hmm, something that she would like to get… What about matching items?"

"Oh, that might be good. She probably wouldn't mind if it's something you can use at home."

"…Thanks to a certain someone's suggestion, we already have matching pajamas, and we've bought dishes and cutlery together. Mahiru isn't keen on having a jingly keychain, and I've already given her jewelry for White Day. That's why, um…I'd like to save any other wearable stuff for next year…"

"Whoops, I forgot you two were living together," Chitose said.

Amane replied bluntly. "We're not."

"Not *yet*, you mean?"

"…No comment."

"My, my~!"

"Shut up. You're too loud."

"But I haven't even said anything ye—."

"Your face is loud enough. Don't make this exchange a routine."

"Aren't *you* the one talking back, though?"

"And whose fault is that?"

"Now, now," Itsuki intervened. "Don't get so worked up."

There was no denying that the two of them were at fault. Wanting to avoid wasting time on a lengthy, unproductive back and forth, Amane swallowed his complaints and turned his attention back to Chitose, who was sneakily snatching Itsuki's now cold fries.

"Anyway, you still haven't decided on a present yet."

"If it was easy to choose, then I wouldn't be struggling like this. It's in situations like this that I actually regret the way Mahiru can be so decisive and isn't into materialistic stuff."

"Still, a present, eh…? The goal is to give Shiina-san something that'll make her happy, right?"

“Yeah.”

“So, does it have to be an actual object?”

“…No, not necessarily.”

Amane had consulted with Chitose and Itsuki in hopes of finding a tangible gift that would leave a lasting impression. However, it wasn’t as though the gift had to be a physical item.

“Then how about this? Maybe you could do something she wants to do, or take her out somewhere she’d like to go. It doesn’t have to be an object. Fulfilling a wish or desire she has might be a better gift.”

“…True.”

Amane’s primary goal was to make Mahiru happy on her birthday, but he recognized now that he might have been too focused on choosing an item to give her rather than granting a wish she may have.

I should get a better idea of Mahiru’s wishes before deciding, Amane concluded.

Although he wanted to present her with a gift, he realized that he might end up presenting Mahiru with a gift he assumed she wanted, not one she truly wished for.

“So, you two are saying that I should do some digging to find out what Mahirun really wants?”

“Yeah. Please do.”

“Heh heh—leave it to me. You just rest easy and make sure you’re at the ready.”

“Yeah, now I’m all worried.”

“Harsh, much!?”

“Sorry, sorry. Thanks, Chitose.”

“You’re welcome!” The proud Chitose seemed pleased to be relied upon, which only increased her high spirits. This led her to pompously encourage, “Ho ho ho, you may depend on and respect me more if you must!” which Amane promptly decided to ignore. He knew from experience that making no comments was the most effective strategy with her.

Sure enough, Chitose began to pout. But what caught Amane’s attention was Itsuki, who, with a pained smile, whispered, “You can always count on me too, y’know?” with a voice that seemed to contain something he left

unspoken.

"I'm counting on you plenty already, if you ask me."

"Ah, that's just Ikkun getting all worried 'cause of that thing with your job, so…"

"Wha—? You dum—!" Itsuki stammered.

"It's surprising, but even you have moments like this, huh…"

The expression on Itsuki's face suggested that he was secretly bothered by Ayaka beating him to the punch in offering Amane advice about a part-time job. Feeling as though he'd been stabbed in the back, Itsuki complained to Chitose in a slightly strained voice, "Why're you turning against me too, Chi?" However, Chitose saw this as a great chance to tease him. Her trademark mischievous smirk, which she would usually show to others, was now turned at Itsuki.

"Oh my, I turned against you? But I was there to comfort you when you were sulking~!"

"Chi…"

"Cheer up, Itsuki. I came to you first for advice this time."

"I don't know how to feel about you thinking I'm upset!"

"Are you in a good mood, then?"

"No, 'cause you two are teasing me!"

As Itsuki gradually became embarrassed and turned away, Amane and Chitose noticed that his ears were faintly red. They exchanged a quiet chuckle—Amane lightly tapped Itsuki on the forehead, while Chitose gave him a gentle nudge on the shoulder.

"Do you get how I feel now?" Amane questioned.

"Ugh… I'll try to be a little more careful from now on…" lamented Itsuki.

"Not just 'a little', you idiot. Make sure you're really careful."

"C'mon, don't get so mad~," Chitose cut in.

"You too, you know."

"*Sniff* You're so mean! Ikkun, Amane's bullying me!"

"You betrayed me earlier, so whatever."

"*Whaaat!?*" This time around, Itsuki was the one to stab Chitose in the back. After seeing Chitose stubbornly grab Itsuki by the shoulders to shake

his body, Amane couldn’t help but burst into laughter.

Chapter 3

Approaching Meetings and Individual Struggles

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"Parent-teacher meetings, huh…"

While grateful that Itsuki and Chitose were discreetly gathering information on Mahiru's wishes in the most roundabout ways possible, Amane continued to work hard at his job. He was carefully preparing for Mahiru's birthday bit by bit, so as not to make her suspicious.

But then one day, pieces of paper were distributed among the class. Written on them was an announcement that was not particularly welcomed by the students. Right after the cultural festival, the school had conducted two rounds of surveys: the first being a confirmation of guardians' schedules, while the second had been a future career aspiration survey for students. Now that it was November, it was soon time to encourage major coordination between the students preparing for exams and the school.

These discussions would involve students reconfirming their desired career paths with a guardian present, taking into account both academic ability and attitude toward life. Glancing over the notice to check the details, Amane noticed that his meeting was scheduled for one of the earlier sessions, so he decided it would be best to inform Shihoko as soon as possible.

Given that her job was flexible enough to allow her to work around the times the meetings could be scheduled, it was already agreed that Shihoko would be the one attending the meetings. Amane was grateful that she could arrange her schedule to participate despite living so far away, but honestly, he wasn't looking forward to it.

Well, she'll be happy to be here.

Since Shihoko was always willing to dote on and fuss over her

son—well, mainly *Mahiru*—she was likely thrilled by the idea of visiting once again. Amane could imagine her throwing both hands up in the air out of pure joy.

"Ugh, my mom can't make it to mine, so I've gotta rely on Dad instead. This actually sucks." Meanwhile, Itsuki, for a completely different reason, looked visibly annoyed. A trace of disgust flashed across his face as he held the notice up to the light, further adding to his dejected expression. He'd remained seated with a grim face even after homeroom had ended and everyone else had left, so he was clearly dreading the occasion.

Itsuki's dislike of the situation was plastered so heavily on his face that Amane, who personally wasn't bothered by the meetings, could only force a slight smile.

"You really can't handle it when your Dad gets involved, can you?" Amane commented.

"You really can't blame me, though. I can already see the nagging coming from a mile away. He'll go on about how my grades are this, my behavior is that, or how I should choose some school for my future."

Amane's perception of Daiki and Itsuki's perception of Daiki were far too different, both in how they felt and how they saw in him. While Amane couldn't agree with Itsuki's view, he had no choice but accept that to Itsuki, that was just the kind of person Daiki was.

Chitose also came over and murmured with a slight troubled look on her face. "Hmm. I've got my mom coming—she's probably gonna dress up like there's no tomorrow."

"Yeah, my mom's coming too…" Amane replied. "But why do parents get so fired up for this in the first place? Some of them turn up like they're dressed for war or something."

Needless to say, Amane wasn't suggesting they wear something overly casual, like loungewear for example. That being said, there was just something awkward about walking side to side with a parent dressed in an outfit that screamed 'Bring it on!' It could be hard to bear when a parent looked entirely different from what their child was used to seeing.

Shihoko often wore formal attire for her job, so Amane was somewhat used to seeing her in fancy clothes. Even so, the thought of her dressing up

in an overzealous outfit still gave him chills.

"To be fair, it pretty much *is* one, don't you think?" Chitose reasoned. "Their kids are throwing themselves into a fierce battle, after all."

"I do get that exams are like a war, but still."

"I think they just wanna show off a bit, y'know? They'll be seen by other classmates at school, and they might say this or that when everyone's lined up. It's kind of embarrassing for a kid, isn't it? So I think some parents just do it so that they don't want to embarrass themselves or their child."

"Yeah, I get that, but…I can already tell my mom's going to be super pumped up."

"Aha ha, I can sorta imagine that."

"Just be normal, please…normal…"

While Amane was certain that Shihoko would choose an appropriate outfit, after factoring in that it was a chance for her to meet Mahiru and discuss her son's future, on top of their school being his father's alma mater, there was no getting around her enthusiasm. Amane found it disheartening to think about just how excited his mom would probably get.

Even just the thought of it was daunting to him, so Amane decided to push aside thoughts about his mom for the time being. Instead, he cast a fleeting glance at Mahiru's seat, which was currently empty. Mahiru had stepped away to attend to something in the library, and Amane was slightly relieved that she wasn't there to hear their conversation. If she had, it likely would have upset her.

…I have to be careful what I say.

Amane hadn't heard of Mahiru's parents attending an event like this before. Had they attended, it was likely that they'd have become a hot topic of conversation around school if they'd been spotted by a classmate. Thus, it was safe to assume that her parents had never come. Amane wasn't even sure whether Mahiru had told her parents about any previous meetings at all. Given how she felt about her parents, and how her parents felt about her, she had likely chosen not to tell them even a single thing.

Although her father, Asahi, might attend if Mahiru informed him, Amane had a feeling that Mahiru herself would decline. To Mahiru, Asahi's presence and involvement were things she considered no longer

meaningful, so she would likely choose not to inform him.

"You know, just thinking about my meeting is making me upset too, so let's not dwell on it!" Chitose interjected in a cheerful voice to lighten the atmosphere, before lowering it again, grinning like she was plotting something. "Anyways, My Lord, I've been secretly gathering info for that matter we discussed earlier. Heh heh heh."

"Your face. Mind your face," warned Amane. Internally relieved that the topic had changed before Mahiru returned to the classroom, he then peered at the note held in Chitose's hand.

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The day of the parent-teacher meetings came sooner than expected. Amane's meeting was scheduled after school, so Shihoko had planned to arrive slightly ahead of time. From afar, he caught sight of her standing at the visitors' entrance.

Ah, she's really gone all out, he immediately thought.

Provided she kept quiet, Shihoko looked just like a gentle and composed woman. However, today she had opted to wear a suit, supplementing it with makeup that offered a more dignified look compared to her usual gentle style. It was likely a refined version of her work attire. Something about it made her hard to approach—in a stark contrast to her usual self, she now exuded a sharp and intimidating aura. It felt as though she had even adjusted her posture to match her serious attire.

Despite being his own mother, Shihoko's excessively youthful and age-defying appearance drew discreet glances from nearby students, some of whom had stayed behind for club activities and others had meetings during the same time slot. This made it incredibly difficult for Amane to approach her. However, as hesitant as he was, the time for the interview could not be changed. He mustered up his courage and called out, "Mom." In response, her face instantly lit up with a bright smile.

"Oh my, Amane! It's been about a month, I'm glad to see you're looking well," Shihoko said, smiling. All traces of her previously intimidating atmosphere and expression vanished, which was very much like her.

Amane suddenly felt exhausted. Amused at his response, Shihoko teased him by saying, “Oh dear, are you so happy to see your mother again that you’ve gone weak?” to which Amane narrowed his eyes and retorted, “*As if*.”

Perhaps to nobody’s surprise, Shihoko acted no differently despite being dressed to the nines. She giggled merrily, after which they began to leisurely walk down the hallway.

Even though she wasn’t familiar with the school’s layout, Shihoko marched forward, confident that Amane would guide her as necessary. Since there was still quite a bit of time left before his meeting, Amane sighed and began following Shihoko.

“You never contact me unless you need something, Amane. It’s quite troublesome, indeed.”

“Am I supposed to…?”

“Aw, don’t be like that. A little chat here and there wouldn’t hurt.”

“You always talk about the most mundane things though, Mom.” It wasn’t that Amane disliked those kinds of conversations, but that Shihoko could be too overwhelming at times. A single response from him often led to ten more messages from her, and this happened constantly. Just keeping up with the conversation became exhausting in itself.

“Isn’t that what small talk is all about? The point is to keep communicating.”

“Just please, don’t go too far with it. Also stop sending Mahiru photos behind my back.”

“*Whaaat?*”

“Don’t give me that.”

Despite having scolded her once already, his photos were still secretly and steadily making their way into Mahiru’s hands. Amane knew he had to firmly refuse once again, making it clear that it needed to stop.

“Then I’ll create a group with you and Mahiru-chan, and share them there. This way, it won’t be behind your back!”

“What about my consent!?”

“I’m just kidding.”

Amane grimaced as hard as he could. To him, that casual statement of hers sounded nothing like a joke. She then chided him, saying, “My, if you

keep making faces like that while you're young, it'll stick when you're older."

Then if I get a bunch of wrinkles when I'm older, I'm blaming you for it.

"Anyway, you've been working hard on your studies, I hope?" Once Amane's face returned to normal, Shihoko asked, maintaining her frank tone.

"You'd know by looking at my report cards so far."

Amane always sent anything related to tests, rankings, and report cards directly to his parents. He'd never hidden anything, so there was no reason for Shihoko not to be aware of his academic performance.

"True, but it's also a fact that the teacher might have another perspective to give. It's a good idea to hear what your teacher has to say, don't you think?"

"…I'm trying my best in my own way. I'm confident that I haven't slacked in the effort department. I…might not be able to say I'm living a life I'm proud of yet, but I'm making an effort to get there."

In his first year in high school, Amane knew that he had an earnest nature and naturally good grades, but he was only driven by the expectation to maintain them. He had no clear purpose. He had no particular passion or obligation. He studied simply because that was what students were supposed to do.

It was during his second year that Amane's mindset began to change. Motivated to stand beside Mahiru without her being disparaged because of him, and to hold pride in himself, he began to strive for the sake of their future.

One might even say that it was his mentality itself that had changed. Along with his newfound motivation and attitude, rather than aimlessly maintaining his grades, the most significant change was that he'd become more enthusiastic towards improving himself, enabling him to work even harder toward his future. So far, his grades this year were even better than the year before, and Amane anticipated that, at this rate, he'd receive significantly better grades by the end of the year. This fueled his motivation even more.

"Ah, well, yes. I already knew that," Shihoko acknowledged.

"C'mon…"

“Once you decide on something, you’ll see it through to the end. That’s what you’re like after all, right?” Shihoko stated without a trace of doubt. Her words were straightforward enough to stop Amane from voicing any complaints he had. “You’re *my* son, after all. I’ve been watching over you for seventeen years—I know you very well. You’re quite disciplined in that sense. For everything you’ve poured your all into, you’ve achieved results in some form or another. Plus…”

“Plus what?”

“You can’t afford to be sloppy with Mahiru-chan around, right? Boys love to show off, after all.” Shihoko winked at him with a teasing, mischievous smile.

Amane pursed his lips and turned away. “Be quiet. C’mon, it’s almost time, Mom. Let’s go.”

“My, my. Perhaps I hit the nail on the head.”

Brushing off his mom’s unnecessary comments, Amane quickened his pace, paying no heed to the amused laughter behind him as he led the way.

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Initially planned to last only about ten to fifteen minutes, the parent-teacher meeting concluded much faster than expected. Amane’s exemplary honor-student-like behavior and strong academic ability allowed the meeting to proceed very smoothly. Additionally, as his current grades more or less matched the requirements for his university of choice, there wasn’t much to discuss.

That had been the final parent-teacher meeting held before his critical third year of high school. Amane had anticipated that it might require a longer discussion or more in-depth conversation about preparing for his upcoming exams, but it turned out to be nothing more than a confirmation of intentions between him, his mother, and his teacher. All in all, it was surprisingly brief.

After thanking his teacher and leaving the meeting room, Shihoko discarded the serious mother act she had put on during the discussion and her usual, light-hearted smile had returned as they walked away. This was

partly due to her maintaining a composed front during the meeting, but also due to her relief after hearing the positive feedback from his homeroom teacher.

"Well done. Not that I was worried, but it's reassuring to know that even the teacher thinks you're a great student, and hearing that directly from the teacher makes me even happier since I now know that you're working even harder than I thought."

"Well, I mean, doing well in school was the condition for me to live on my own."

Even though the difference in motivation Amane had between his first and second years was night and day, his grades during his first year had already been satisfactory. He never thought his mother would need to reconfirm that, but a promise was a promise. He understood it was her right to ensure there were no complaints about his part of the agreement.

"Ahh, I only said that to keep you on your toes. Honestly, I figured you'd keep your grades up even if I didn't say anything. For what it's worth, you were always a diligent boy."

"What do you mean, 'For what it's worth'?"

"My, you've always been diligent. Before, it was in a more reticent, steady way, which made it difficult to notice your enthusiasm at first glance. Now, you're no longer satisfied with just one goal. You keep finding and grabbing new ones over and over—it's like a power-up, if you will? It's a wonderful thing."

" …Well, thanks."

"Looks like your grades have improved significantly since your first year too, so you have no complaints from me. It's almost as if the switch for your motivation is right beside you."

"Just so you know, I'm not doing it for Mahiru. It's for myself. Still, I can't deny that looking at her pushes me to do better. It lights a fire in me."

Amane was aware that he had been diligent, but it seemed almost presumptuous to compare that to Mahiru's level of diligence. He had never met anyone as self-disciplined as her, and he knew that the effort she put into improving many facets of herself to live up to her reputation was nothing short of extraordinary. The difference between them was

embarrassingly stark.

Mahiru had already studied through most of the high school curriculum and had moved on to consolidating her fundamental knowledge in preparation for university entrance exams, so the scope of her efforts so far was immense. Once, she had casually mentioned that *"Working hard now to make things easier later isn't as arduous as one might think."* Her tone had been so nonchalant that it worried Amane. He was concerned that she might be pushing herself past her limits.

Despite that, being by Mahiru's side had inspired Amane even more. Seeing Mahiru working so hard made him loathe resting on his laurels. Consequently, Amane followed suit and began to focus even harder on his studies, as a way to improve himself.

"It's so wonderful that you can uplift and encourage one another. You're so passionate about each other—in *many* ways."

"Come on, Mom…"

"Oh dear, don't scowl at me. I'm actually complimenting you. It's true that you and Mahiru-chan get along so well, so what's there to be unhappy about?"

"Nothing. It's the way you interpret things and then tease me about it."

While Amane had an unusually close relationship with his mother compared to others his age, that didn't come without its own set of issues.

Mom always says stuff she shouldn't.

Whether it was her nature, deliberate, or simply a result of her fiery desire to make Mahiru her daughter-in-law at all costs, Shihoko had a tendency to prod Amane about any and all matters involving Mahiru. It was as if she was trying to rush him along or ignite a flame in him.

"Goodness, how harsh. It's just a little conversation," Shihoko replied, exasperated.

"Continuing to do something that someone dislikes isn't good conversation."

"All right, all right, I was in the wrong."

Despite saying that she was wrong, Shihoko didn't seem particularly apologetic. Amane shot her a glare before sighing audibly, trying to make her feel even slightly guilty as a way to settle the matter.

As the unrepentant Shihoko made her way down the hallway with light steps, Amane massaged his forehead and began retracing his path when Shihoko suddenly stopped and looked out a nearby window. Curious, Amane also paused, and for basically the first time, he picked up on the sounds of students in the middle of club activities, their shouts carrying through the air.

Instructions were given in strong, clear voices, chants were made to synchronize breaths, and there were bursts of jubilant cheers, perhaps celebrating something, punctuated by the signal of a whistle. Amidst these sounds, music from the brass band echoed from a nearby classroom, almost as if they were playing to cheer on all the students engrossed in their activities.

"Ah, the sounds of youth. How lovely," Shihoko remarked with a wistful smile, gazing fondly at the distant figures of the students. "Anyway, Amane, you're going to put your all into studying for your entrance exams from now on, right?"

Just as Amane was about to ask if something was on her mind, Shihoko's usual expression returned. She looked at him with the same old gaze she always had. Knowing that if he asked now, he wouldn't get an answer, Amane decided to ignore the earlier look of nostalgia and envy in her eyes.

"…Well, yeah. A year from now, the students with recommendations will already be taking—or maybe have even finished—their exams. So there's only a year left to prepare."

Amane considered that continuing to work part-time during such a crucial period was a reckless move, but he quickly dismissed the thought as he had already decided to balance both. No matter what, he was determined to make it work.

"Then next year will surely be a busy time for you," commented Shihoko.

"Pretty much. That's just how it goes from second to third year, though I can't say I'm fond of how packed my schedule will get, though."

"Alas, that is the path every student preparing for exams must take."

Nobody actively wanted to be buried in studies. It was merely a necessity, something that had to be done for their own sake, in order to seriously tackle the entrance exams. Amane, having already resigned

himself to the busy period in his future, received a nod of approval from Shihoko.

"You're well prepared. You've already taken this into account as well," she said with a smile. "Do come home this winter. With your exam next year, you won't have much free time."

"…I knew this already, but thinking about what's to come is still unnerving."

Shihoko chuckled. "What a grim look. Well, I suppose it's never a fun period. I saw my own fair share of hell back in my student days."

"Were you smart back then again, Mom?"

"Am I to assume that was an insult?"

"Why would you take it that way!? I mean like, in terms of grades!"

As Amane knew her now, Shihoko was highly intelligent. She had accumulated a vast wealth of knowledge—though some of which she was probably better without—and the way she spoke was incredibly rational. While Amane figured that she was considered a smart person, he found it surprisingly hard to imagine what her grades actually looked like.

Amane's seventeen years of experience with his mother told him that once her mood soured, it could take a while for her spirits to return. Thus, Amane had hurried to clarify what he meant to prevent any misunderstandings. Shihoko shot him a cold stare for a brief moment before dismissing the matter with a simple, "Goodness me."

Shortly after, she began to think. "Hmm. Of course, out of me and Shuuto-san, I wouldn't claim to be the smarter one. I suppose my grades were rather average back then. I excelled in no particular area, so one could say that I was just your typical student."

"Your typical student, eh…"

"What's with that skeptical look? Though I may not look it now, I was a very plain and quiet girl at the time."

"Plain and quiet, eh." To Amane, the idea that the flashy and outgoing Shihoko was once plain and quiet seemed more akin to a self-proclaimed image than reality.

"If you have something to say, then out with it, okay?" Shihoko urged.

"It's absolutely nothing."

“Goodness me.”

Despite being glared at, Amane knew better than to say anything that might make his mother even angrier. Because he understood how to handle his mother somewhat, Amane chose to stay silent. Shihoko realized that pressing the issue further would be futile, so she turned her face away with a huff, muttering, “What a stubborn boy you are.” Despite that bait, Amane doubled down on his silence.

“Regardless, I wasn’t particularly diligent or outstanding enough to earn anyone’s praise. I did pick out the path I wanted eventually, which was great and all, but since it was quite a sudden decision, I had to cram at the last minute for the exam. Those times were really quite something—I think the impression I gave was totally different.”

“Impression, as in?”

“I basically looked like I was about to keel over, or like I had no breathing room whatsoever, I believe. My friends back then used to tell me I had quite the ghastly look, like I was being driven into a corner going insane. It was quite bad, apparently.”

For Amane, his mom’s usual soft appearance made her friends’ description of her appearance being ghastly all the more difficult to believe. Surprised, he instinctively turned to look at her. Shihoko promptly nodded, showing no hint of her past demeanor. “Well, I can say in hindsight that I had no concrete plan to speak of,” she said, showing her signature gentle look. Even though it wasn’t unheard of for a mother to appear different to her child than her friends, Amane still found it hard to imagine his mother showing any kind of desperate behavior.

His mom was wearing a bright smile as she shrugged in response to the look Amane gave her. “In your case, Amane, I’m not particularly worried. Unlike me, you’ve always been one to prepare well in advance, and you work hard to nail your foundational knowledge. I trust that you won’t make any careless mistakes, and that you understand your own abilities well enough to make informed choices.”

“Yeah, of course,” Amane affirmed.

“You’ve already planned out how you’ll prepare for your exams, haven’t you?”

“Naturally. I’ve tailored it to match the entrance exams of the university I want to enroll in.”

“As a parent, I’ll support you wherever you want to go, but it’s only natural for me to be curious. I understand why you might not discuss it with us much, but if you have a clear goal in mind, it helps if you tell us. That way, we can support you properly.” Shihoko spoke in a kind and tender tone, trying not to sound like she was scolding him. Instead, her words were nothing more than a gentle reminder. Now, feeling as though he was being terribly ungrateful, a sharp sense of guilt pricked Amane’s heart. He knew that even if he chose not to speak up now, Shihoko would not blame him for it. However, as her son, he also understood that her words came from a place of parental concern, so although hesitant, Amane slowly looked down, taking a moment to gather his own feelings.

“…I don’t quite have a specific goal in mind. Truthfully, if I can secure a job that allows me to live a comfortable life with Mahiru, then I’m not really fussed about the specifics,” Amane confessed. Though he had consulted others regarding his choice of university, his decisions were largely made on his own, nor was he fixated on any particular institution in general. “My choice was less about chasing my passions and more about picking a university and major that will open the most doors for me employment-wise, after considering my abilities. Of course, the prerequisite was that it had to be something I was at least interested in.”

The university Amane chose offered programs in the fields he was interested in learning more about, and it matched his current academic abilities and the effort he planned to put in. Moreover, it appeared to have great prospects for future employment. Compared to other students who had a clear vision of their future careers or specific goals for their university experience, Amane’s thought process might seem somewhat lacking to some. Amane knew this all too well. As a result, he’d been reluctant to discuss his choices too eagerly. While he was fully committed to preparing for university and planned to exert his best effort to avoid bringing shame to himself, his confidence waned when it came to picking a specific future career he aimed for.

“My priorities are, first of all, to maintain a comfortable lifestyle once I

start working, secondly, to have some free time, and lastly, to find a job I like that enables me to live a healthy life. Sure, the main point of university is to study specialized fields, but I don't have the passion to make a decision based on that alone… I want to prioritize what comes *after*."

Although Amane had a great deal of determination to succeed in his university entrance exams, he still lacked a vision for what exactly he wanted to do afterward. He had yet to find the passion to commit to what he wanted to study there. Amane groaned mentally. This contradiction of being passionate without a passion left him feeling internally conflicted.

Observing her son's inner turmoil, Shihoko responded with neither anger nor sadness. Instead, she looked at him with a calm, understanding gaze that seemed to say, *I see, so that's it.*

"It can be hard to tell whether you have a dream or not. Being such a pragmatist is very much like you, Amane."

"It's not so much being a pragmatist as it is making a list of priorities due to not being able to make my mind up." Usually, one would start by deciding what they want to do, and then choose a profession after graduating by comparing the conditions among various companies. At the moment, however, this wasn't something Amane could do. "I envy those who have a clear idea of the path they want to take," Amane continued. "I came here—my dad's alma mater—because I wanted to live quietly, away from home. It's been great getting used to a new lifestyle and finding my place here…but when it comes down to it, I don't have a clear vision of what I want to become or what I want to do."

"I enrolled into art school enthusiastically on a whim, so I can't say much myself, but whatever you choose, make sure you won't have any regrets, Amane. It's your life, after all."

"It's an important decision in life. I understand."

The foundation of one's life was often laid during their student years, which was the reason why Amane was agonizing over his choices. For important decisions like these, his parents respected his autonomy, allowing him to make all his decisions for himself. However, this only added to his anxiety.

Compared to students whose paths were decided by their parents or

had to give up on further education due to financial constraints, Amane's circumstances might be a privileged problem to have. However, the freedom to choose for himself also meant that he bore full responsibility for those choices. It would be a decision he made himself—even if he made a grave mistake, it would be his alone to bear.

"We'll only be here until you two can stand on your own two feet. From there, your lives will be in your own hands, right? It's a path you must carve out for yourself. Think it through properly and make your decisions carefully."

"I understand."

"Either way, what you want to be or want to do can change at any time. When that time comes, make sure you are knowledgeable and skillful enough so that you won't have much trouble choosing your new path. Adding more cards to your hand should be the priority while you're still a student. You might find it hard to gather the time and money to do so later, so rely on your parents while you still can."

"…Okay."

"Don't worry. It might not seem like it, but Shuuto-san and I have been saving diligently together. We've been building it up so that you can safely spread your wings when the time comes. Feel free to rely on us as much as you need."

Shihoko always valued Amane's freedom. As she believed in him and was constantly ready to lend her support, she understood his concerns and gave him a simple push. Even if Amane found her bothersome at times, it was during moments like these that he was reminded of her true essence as an admirable and supportive mother. This realization warmed Amane deeply, a comforting heat spreading through his heart.

Whether Shihoko was aware of Amane's feelings of gratitude and admiration or not was uncertain. Her signature smile still on her face, she brought her hand to her chest in a show of utmost confidence. "Hah, you always try to handle everything on your own, so lean on us a bit, won't you? Oh, but I'm not too confident about helping with studies, so it's best you ask Shuuto-san for that."

"The way you singled out studies is very much like you, Mom."

“It’s all about finding the right person for the job.”

“That’s basically the same as admitting you aren’t great at studies, you know.”

“Did you say something?”

“No, nothing.”

“My goodness. Oh, but feel free to ask anything you want about fashion, okay? Your Mom is more than happy to go all out for you!”

“Yeah, I’ll pass.”

“Oh, come on!”

A dull, heavy thud soon ran down Amane’s back, but it wasn’t painful. Instead, it was as though a gust of wind had swept through him, blowing away the timid and anxious parts of himself that had amassed in the depths of his heart.

Influenced by Shihoko’s boundlessly warm smile, Amane found himself cracking a small smile of his own.

I thought I’d become quite tough, but it looks like I can still be sensitive at times, Amane thought, amused.

“All right, let’s head over to Mahiru-chan’s place, shall we? Is her meeting today too?”

“Mahiru’s is tomorrow.”

Shihoko may have just said that in passing, but Amane felt that there was nothing more he could say. He predicted that the parent-teacher meeting would commence with only the latter being present. Broaching the subject might be akin to driving a small thorn into Mahiru’s side. Shihoko, likely somewhat aware of the circumstances, didn’t voice the concerns in Amane’s mind. Instead, she simply said, “Oh, is that so? Had it been today, we could have gone shopping together on the way home,” showing slight regret.

“Perhaps I should drop by to say hello. It hasn’t been that long, but it somehow feels like it’s been a while since we last met.”

“Then feel free. Mahiru would be thrilled.”

Shihoko giggled. “I see you aren’t trying to stop me.”

“It would be pointless to try and stop you, but even so, why would I? You two really enjoy each other’s company.”

Given the choice between worrying about Shihoko filling Mahiru's head with strange ideas or getting to see the joy Mahiru felt when she was with someone she truly adored, choosing the latter option was an easy decision for Amane. While Mahiru liked being spoiled, she could only open up to her boyfriend, Amane, or Shihoko, a fellow woman who cherished her like a mother. Amane would never deny Mahiru the happiness of seeing such an important person in her life. That being said, Amane still couldn't shake the worry that his mom would tell Mahiru things that she shouldn't, so he of course decided he'd keep an eye on them.

Mahiru is pure of heart, and Mom takes advantage of that by putting strange ideas in her head.

Without Shuuto there to keep things in check, Shihoko, often carried away—or perhaps all too happy to do so—tended to tell Mahiru things that might be premature for her, or divulge unnecessary details about Amane. In that regard, Shihoko was a person whom her son placed little trust or reliance on.

"You've become quite kind, haven't you?"

"I bet I'd be even kinder if you would just calm down a bit," Amane retorted.

"That's a terrible thing to say, that I'm not calm."

"Mom, please, just lower your voice a bit and cut down on the gestures. We can start from there."

Amane often thought that he could respect his mother more if she overcame her tendency to act younger than her age around him, though he never voiced this out loud. Shihoko simply shrugged. She gave him a look as if to say he was being overly sensitive.

"…I wonder where all your cuteness went."

"Say what you want. I was never cute to begin with."

"See, that's precisely what I'm talking about… Oh?"

"*Hm?*"

Shihoko was the first to notice.

She blinked several times and focused her gaze down the hallway. Amane followed suit and turned his head in the same direction, where he saw two familiar figures. One was Itsuki—his mood was visibly sour, and he

had uncharacteristically fastened every button on his shirt. The other was a man dressed in a sleek, well-fitted suit, whom Amane hadn't seen since the cultural festival.

The look Daiki had given Itsuki—his son—was far from soft. However, upon noticing that Amane and Shihoko were there, his eyes turned gentle and he smiled calmly, a warm light filling his gaze.

"Hello, Daiki-san," Amane greeted. "It has been since the festival."

"Ah, Fujimiya-kun, and your mother as well. Greetings. It's good to see you both looking well," replied Daiki.

"*Tch*." Amane noticed Itsuki click his tongue at his father's warm smile—a smile he hardly directed at his own son. Amane wasn't sure whether to comment on it, but it was clear that Itsuki was in a particularly bad mood. He'd known that they had been at odds for a while, and had heard about their family issues from Itsuki directly, so their friction wasn't surprising. However, today, the sparks between them seemed especially intense.

…They must have fallen out just before this.

Although Itsuki had already been upset about the parent-teacher meetings, Amane hadn't at all expected the situation to worsen even further. Amane shifted his attention to Itsuki, keeping his gaze fixed on him. Considering how pouty he had been, Itsuki now wore an expression that could only be described as laden with thorns. Itsuki noticed Amane looking at him and turned his head to the window awkwardly.

"My son has been in your care. Thank you," Daiki displayed his appreciation.

"My, that really should be my line… Amane seems to have really opened up to Itsuki-kun, and is often helped out by him."

Aware of the fierce discord between Itsuki and Daiki, Shihoko continued to smile as she spoke. Having to listen to their parents converse was always an awkward and uncomfortable experience for children, but Amane figured that if it could help ease Itsuki's irritated mood, then it was worth it.

"My son often talks about him."

"Wait, Mom…"

While Amane was hoping for a distraction to ease Itsuki's tension, he

hadn't meant for Shihoko to reveal something like that right in front of him.

Shihoko turned towards the flustered Amane, curiously asking "Something wrong?" She wore an expression of feigning ignorance, and Amane was once again reminded of how shrewd a person his mother could be. In all likelihood, Shihoko had made the comment intentionally in order to break the heavy atmosphere. Amane couldn't help but feel like he'd suddenly been stabbed in the back and exaggeratedly raised his eyebrow at her.

"Mom, come on…"

"Oh, was I mistaken?"

"I mean, no, but still!"

"Even as your mom, I can tell that you place great trust in Itsuki-kun. You rely on him often, don't you?"

"What kind of idiot admits that right in front of them, though!?"

"It won't get through unless you tell them directly, Amane."

"I say it all the time!"

"Oh, really? Is that true, Itsuki-kun?" With a cheerful and innocent smile, Shihoko turned the conversation to Itsuki, who had been silent until now.

Although slightly flustered at first, Itsuki eventually nodded. He scratched his cheek, a bit embarrassed. "Ahh…well, yes. Um, he does take me by surprise occasionally."

"Heh heh, Amane has become quite honest with himself, hasn't he?" Shihoko's laughter was merry yet dignified. She enjoyed the moment before turning her warm smile toward Daiki, who had been silently observing their exchange. "Truly, thank you so much for everything. This boy of mine isn't very direct, so having Itsuki-kun around has been a great help to say the least."

"…It appears so," Daiki affirmed, his voice somewhat stiff and matter-of-fact. Although Itsuki didn't openly grimace at his father's response, the slight twitch of his brow was hard to miss. Noticing this, Daiki's sharp eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "You look like you have something to say."

"Nah, not really," Itsuki shot back.

Deducing that Itsuki had no intention of dropping his stubborn attitude,

Daiki heaved a sigh before pointing in the direction Amane and Shihoko had been standing earlier.

"…I'll step out for a while. Be in front of the meeting room before it's time to start."

"I get it. Just go already."

Even Amane, who was curter than most, was taken aback by Itsuki's current attitude. Calling Itsuki curt wouldn't even begin to cut it—he instead seemed outright hostile, unwilling to accept Daiki even in the slightest. As someone who knew their situation, this kept Amane on edge the entire time. Daiki, on the other hand, had either given up reproaching Itsuki for his rude behavior or decided against doing so while in front of others. With another deep sigh, he accepted Itsuki's defiance without further comment and slipped past Amane and Shihoko without a word.

Even though Daiki was on friendly terms with Amane and Shihoko, the tension between him and Itsuki was palpable. When Daiki's footsteps finally grew distant, Amane couldn't help but let out a deep breath. He wasn't accustomed to such intense situations, and as he naturally sided with Itsuki, Daiki's attitude was especially hard to stomach. With him now gone, the atmosphere softened, which reflected blatantly in Itsuki's expression.

Amane offered him a gentle look. "Oh, right. Your meeting is today too. It completely slipped my mind."

"You already finished yours?" Itsuki asked.

"Yeah. It ended pretty quick."

"I see. Mine's the one after the next."

Their exchange was rather dry. The reason was likely due to the tension lingering in the air from their encounter just moments ago. Although the atmosphere had mellowed to a certain extent, beneath the surface, it was still tense. Itsuki, too, had picked up on this. He looked down at the floor uncomfortably, avoiding eye contact. His irritation may have vanished from his face, but Itsuki was unable to suppress his inner turmoil. His eyes, which he kept turned away, appeared almost trembling.

"I don't get the point in these parent-teacher meetings. I mean, there isn't really anything to talk about. I don't even have a clue if he's willing to listen to what I have to say," Itsuki shared.

“What do you plan to do in the future, Itsuki?” Amane then asked. As his friend, there likely would have been many opportunities to talk about it, but the circumstances with Daiki made that difficult.

Was this really the right time to ask? Amane asked himself, but since he’d already voiced it, there was no taking it back.

“I’ve decided what I want, but whether or not my dad will approve is a different story. He has his own ideas for where I should be.”

“And your mom?”

“She’s all ‘Can’t we just let him do whatever he wants?’ I guess,” Itsuki answered. After talking about his mother instead, Itsuki simply shrugged, slightly exasperated. The sharpness that had earlier kept people at a distance seemed to have now diminished.

Having never actually met Itsuki’s mother, Amane couldn’t say much with certainty, but she appeared to have quite the laissez-faire attitude. That much was evident from the way Itsuki described her. This freedom-centric approach of hers was likely a kind of salvation for Itsuki.

“Talk about polar opposites…”

“It’s not so much her being hands-off as it is her thinking ‘Our son isn’t one to let himself get bossed around, is he? Rather than risk him reacting poorly and going down the wrong path, it’s better to let him do what he wants,’” explained Itsuki.

“She sure has you all figured out,” Amane remarked, laughing at how accurate Itsuki’s mother’s prediction had turned out. As his friend, Amane saw Itsuki embody the exact kind of rebellious behavior she had worried about.

She’s as frank and clear-cut as they come, Amane couldn’t help but think despite her not even being his own mother. He was certain that her refreshing, merciless, yet understanding nature was a saving grace for Itsuki.

As proof of that, the once rough atmosphere had settled considerably.

“Thing is, Dad’s the only one who hasn’t relented yet. I understand his thought process and reasoning, but having them pushed onto me just isn’t it,” Itsuki said.

“Yeah.”

“Sure, as things are now, they’ll be paying for my tuition…but that doesn’t mean I’m okay with him completely disregarding my wishes. If that happens, I’ll run away from home for real.”

“I doubt Daiki-san would go that far.” Having spoken with Daiki when Itsuki wasn’t around, Amane knew that he wouldn’t force decisions that completely disregarded Itsuki’s wishes. However, from Itsuki’s perspective, he still felt oppressed, believing that his father might act in such a way. As an outsider, the situation was a frustrating one to witness.

For better or worse, Daiki’s stubbornness and inscrutable personality only seemed to incite Itsuki’s rebelliousness even further.

“Hah, who knows. He might be calm now, but what he’ll say next is anyone’s guess. Does he not realize how badly he messed up being so overbearing with my brother? I’m not my dad’s second chance at life, nor am I my brother’s replacement,” Itsuki said, his voice ringing out with bitterness and pain, as if spitting blood. His clear denial encouraged neither comfort nor sympathy from Amane.

Amane’s parents were letting him do as he pleased. They expressed their love in ways he could easily understand. With this in mind, he realized that saying anything else would only hurt Itsuki further, as his family had a vastly different dynamic.

Itsuki, having vented the bitterness that had built up inside him, seemed to register Amane’s expression. This caused him to look down at his feet awkwardly, likely unable to gauge how Amane had taken the conversation.

“…My bad.”

“No, you shouldn’t apologize for this. The one hurt by it all is you… This isn’t really my place to say, but you should try talking it out with him.”

“…Yeah, I know.” After a moment of hesitation, Itsuki nodded and then followed after Daiki.

No matter which direction things went, he likely understood that he needed to talk things out if he wanted to move forward.

There were always people out there who, no matter what, you could never find common ground with. While Amane didn’t believe that Daiki fell into that category, he acknowledged that Itsuki might never be able to see eye to eye with his father. The possibility of their relationship always

remaining at an impasse was very real. In that case, Amane was determined to stand by Itsuki. Although still a minor and limited in how he could help, Amane wanted to support his friend to the best of his ability, offering to assist him however he could.

Although Amane was ready to support Itsuki, he still hoped that somewhere along the line, Itsuki and Daiki might find a way to understand each other. He couldn't interfere in someone else's family matters, but he couldn't help but hope for a resolution.

"Itsuki-kun seems to have his own family struggles too," Shihoko remarked after silently watching Itsuki with her gaze as he ran off. She had blended herself into the background to avoid interrupting the conversation between two friends.

"Ahh. Yeah, he does."

"As a parent myself, I can understand wanting your child to pursue a path that you approve of. Parents become skeptical if their child chooses a path that won't lead them to a successful career. They naturally want their child to walk the road with the fewest unnecessary hardships."

As Shihoko's position was different from that of Amane's, she could see the relationship between Itsuki and his father from a more realistic perspective. She sighed softly and shrugged her shoulders. "Parenting is a difficult thing," she murmured.

"In my eyes, I believe that children should be the ones who lead their own lives. If parents interfere too much, it impedes their ability to develop independence. A moderate amount of involvement is the way to go. Only if they are heading down a dangerous path should a parent step in and guide them back. That should be enough."

"Mom, you're really rational about all this."

"Because no matter how you look at it, interfering too much is clearly unhealthy for children."

Shihoko, firm in her conviction, didn't waver as she said her piece. "Parents who place unnecessary restrictions on their children do it more for themselves. Using 'it's for their own good' as justification, they narrow down their child's opportunities for their own convenience. I don't like that at all."

Shihoko loved and cared for Amane dearly, but not once had she forced him to do anything. She always respected his autonomy, and showed him the various paths he could take without leading him by the hand. Instead, she watched over him from behind, ready to step in and stop him with a grab of his shoulders if clear danger was ahead. Otherwise, she quietly waited by his side, no matter how much he agonized over which path to choose.

Experiencing this firsthand, Amane sensed Shihoko's unfaltering stance as a parent.

"Once you become independent, you must live using your own strength. If parents try to dictate their children's will and forcibly chain them down, it will only bring them both suffering in the long run. The real hell starts when the parents are gone. For the child, it will be like living with your legs broken—you might've forgotten how to even stand. They would just experience a slow and steady state of decline," Shihoko explained decisively. "Nobody could *ever* make me think it's beneficial for the child," she added, cutting through the topic with ease.

Seeing the expression on Amane's face, Shihoko smiled bitterly. "Well, Itsuki-kun's father seems more awkward than fixated or controlling. I don't sense any malice from him at all. Nevertheless, it's not like he's unwittingly binding Itsuki-kun either. You can see the guilt he feels. He's likely poor at communicating himself properly and can't bring himself to take back what he once said—he's just like my own father."

Amane could only cock his head. He would never have imagined Shihoko to compare Daiki to her father—in other words, his grandfather. To Amane, he was a gentle, kind-hearted old man who was talkative and loved to smile. As far as he could remember, his grandfather bore no resemblance to the person Shihoko was comparing him to.

Making out Amane's confusion, Shihoko chuckled and said, "He's just soft with his grandkids. He was actually quite stubborn and was never good with words." It seemed Amane had been cherished by his grandfather more than he had realized. As he processed this information which took him a whole seventeen years of living on this planet to learn, Shihoko rocked with amusement. After nodding in satisfaction, she glanced down the hallway

where Itsuki and Daiki had disappeared.

"Well, as long as they understand reason and common sense, it's best to leave the rest to their own abilities and thinking. But in return, we teach them to ensure they can properly take care of themselves when they become adults," Shihoko stated firmly.

"I'll keep that in mind," Amane replied.

Shihoko chuckled. "I don't worry much about you, really. After all, you are the son of Shuuto-san and I."

"Well, I am pretty sure I think the same way Dad does to a certain extent, yeah."

"To think you would leave me out of the picture. It appears I haven't taught you well enough."

"I'm just kidding. So please, stop crushing my toes."

Amane groaned, having slipped up and earned his mother's reprimand. Meanwhile, Shihoko—his assailant—laughed heartily and gave Amane a pat on the back.

Chapter 4

Memories of the Past

“(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs.”

As his parent-teacher meeting was scheduled for today, Amane had of course taken the day off from work. After the meeting was over, he accompanied Shihoko back home.

Mahiru usually spent most of her time at Amane’s place, and today was no exception. As she had been waiting for him in the living room, she trotted over to the front door after hearing the sound of it unlocking. Shihoko was no longer surprised by this, so it seemed that now, she also considered it ordinary.

Amane was unsure whether to feel dissatisfied or embarrassed about how she had accepted it as the norm. However, since it was now so typical of them that nobody even commented on it anymore, he figured his only choice was to drop it.

“Oh, Shihoko-san, you came to visit.” Mahiru greeted her with an enthusiastic smile as if she were welcoming a relative home for an annual visit. Though they had met during the cultural festival, the many events that had occurred since then made it feel like a distant memory.

Even more enthusiastic than Mahiru was Shihoko, who gleefully exclaimed, “Oh my, Mahiru-chan, you look well!” She embraced Mahiru tightly, a delighted expression on her face.

Mahiru, although with red cheeks, accepted her embrace happily, so Amane had no reason to complain. That said, Amane couldn't help but pick up on how Shihoko kept sharing a much more emotional reunion with Mahiru than with him, her own son. The two of them continued to enjoy their affectionate moment for a while until Shihoko, noticing Amane's bemused gaze, said, "Amane might get jealous, so I'll leave it at that," completely misunderstanding the situation. This only made Amane's gaze sharpen even further.

"Did you come for Amane-kun's meeting today?"

"Yes, exactly. With it being this time of year, meetings like those are unavoidable. And now that Amane is in the latter half of his second year, his teacher applied a bit of pressure to make sure I attended."

Although it was rare for a student at Amane's school to live alone, the school administration acknowledged his situation. During previous meetings, they had no issue with his parents' absence… However, with exams soon approaching, the school had concerns about the lack of coordination between his parents and teachers, and as a result, they had requested that Amane bring his parents for the next meeting if possible.

Amane did think it would be awkward if his parents were absent during every meeting. Since he also understood his teacher's concerns about the upcoming exams, Amane made sure to ask his parents to attend this time around.

"Is Shuuto-san at work?" Mahiru asked.

"Yes, he is. It's a busy period for him, so he wasn't able to take any time off. Though, personally, I would've loved a four-way meeting."

"That'd feel incredibly pressuring, so don't even suggest it. Regular meetings make us students feel awkward enough as it is."

Shihoko chuckled, "Oh, I'm sure they do. You should get used to the awkwardness while you have the chance, Amane. Once you graduate, you won't have any of those meetings again."

To students, parent-teacher meetings were a universally awkward and somewhat intimidating ordeal, but for parents, they flew by all too easily.

Either that, or it was simply that Shihoko tended to casually breeze through them. Seeing his mother thoroughly enjoying her position as a parent, Amane sighed deeply.

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As it was already mid-November, the season when temperatures dropped and hot drinks tasted better, the tea that Mahiru made was delicious enough to warm his entire body. Having given up the sofa to Mahiru and Shihoko, Amane sat cross-legged on the floor, sipping his tea slowly while looking up at the two of them. Mahiru still seemed to be getting along with his mother better than he did.

"Your parent-teacher meeting is tomorrow, right, Mahiru-chan?" Shihoko immediately stepped onto a landmine of a sensitive topic, causing Amane to nearly choke on his drink. However, he managed to mask his reaction as he cleared his throat, knowing that overreacting would only provoke Mahiru.

Looking up at Mahiru, Amane noticed that she had her usual smile on her face.

"Yes, although it's certain to be more of a *student*-teacher meeting. I haven't informed my parents, so it won't be a genuine parent-teacher meeting," Mahiru said.

Even after receiving the notice about the parent-teacher conference, Mahiru had never brought it up in conversation nor had she informed her parents, which was to be expected. Shihoko, who knew a thing or two about Mahiru's family situation, observed her unchanged, calm expression. With her usual demeanor, Shihoko let out a "Hmm," sounding thoughtful yet equally untroubled.

"In other words, there's room for me to go with you."

"Mom." Hearing her say something so outrageous, Amane instinctively began to stand up.

Despite that, Shihoko continued with a completely serious expression. "A parent-teacher meeting is just that—a *parent-teacher* meeting. Nowhere does it specify *which* parent has to attend. As long as they're a guardian,

anyone can go, right?" Shihoko described her plan as if it were a stroke of genius. "Besides, she's practically my own daughter, so there's no harm in hearing about her plan for the future. The way I see it, I'm no different from a guardian."

"What are you saying with such a straight face? There's no way our teacher won't say anything."

"Then how about asking Shuuto-san to go? They might not notice at first glance."

"But you said yourself that Dad couldn't take the day off." Though Amane realized his retorts were falling flat, he couldn't help but say something—his words just kept spilling out. "Actually, that's not even the point. You have to think about how Mahiru feels as well. If an outsider suddenly joins a conversation about her future, even if you're close, Mahiru might get uncomfortable."

"Oh, that's a great point. Silly me, I got ahead of myself."

"No, I'm happy you feel that way!" Mahiru exclaimed.

"You don't have to be considerate about Mom, you know."

"It's not that I'm being considerate, it's just, um…it really did make me happy, and I'm grateful. Those are my true feelings." Mahiru gently shook her head, showing no signs of lying. She didn't appear to harbor any feelings of discomfort or confusion about Shihoko's offer. However, it was clear that her genuine happiness wasn't the entire story. While Mahiru displayed a mix of longing and admiration, there was also a hint of resignation in her expression.

"How wonderful it would be if that could happen." Despite Mahiru not uttering a thing, Amane felt as though he could hear those words.

"Since it inevitably involves having to discuss my family matters, I believe that the teacher would ask you to refrain. Even if you went out of your way to attend, it would likely be a waste of time…"

However, Mahiru quickly returned to her usual smile, grasping Shihoko's hand and looking into her face. The fleeting glimpse of bittersweet emotion that had momentarily crossed Mahiru's face was no longer visible.

"Um, please allow me to accept your feelings. It makes me happy that you think of me as your d-daughter, Shihoko-san."

“Oh my! You’re practically my daughter already.”

“Mom,” interjected Amane.

Shihoko responded with a chuckle. “Even Amane’s getting all shy now.”

“I’ll get mad,” he grumbled. Whether Shihoko noticed Mahiru’s subtle change or not, she used Amane as a segue to change the subject and lighten the mood. He immediately went along with it, although not without shooting his mother a slight glare.

Shihoko thoroughly enjoyed Amane’s reaction and looked at Mahiru with a playful smile. She teasingly whispered, “He’s just hiding his embarrassment, isn’t he~?” with a carefree smile.

“That’s what makes him so cute—he’s so easy to read. Right, Mahiru-chan?”

“Amane-kun is always cute.”

“Mahiru…”

“Oh, didn’t you know? I’m always thinking that you’re both cool and cute, Amane-kun.”

For women, ‘cute’ was a kind of compliment, one often used with the meaning of finding something endearing. However, after considering how Mahiru usually behaved, there was a real possibility that she genuinely thought he was cute in the childish sense, which made her comment particularly hard to ignore. Rather than *cute*, Amane wished to be seen as *cool*. At the same time, however, he was aware that he had shown Mahiru some of his more pitiful sides before, which would be quite frustrating for him if that was the reason she perceived him as cute. Though he didn’t voice any complaints, he felt justified in sending her a disapproving glance.

Seeing that Amane wouldn’t directly make his dissatisfaction known, Shihoko continued to grin at him mischievously. “Wow! You must really be honest with Mahiru-chan. She gets to see sides of you that you don’t even show your parents~”

Mahiru giggled. “I think Amane-kun is always honest.”

“I can only hope he is,” Shihoko replied. “Now, Amane doesn’t show much honesty when he’s with me. He used to be so adorable and direct when he was younger.”

“I believe most boys his age struggle to be honest with their mothers.

Their embarrassment seems to get the better of them. But even if his words can be strong, Amane-kun is still kind. I think it's wonderful how he gets all quiet when he realizes he's said too much."

"Exactly. He's at that age now where he wants to act tough. But his personality hasn't actually changed at all, so I'm not worried about that."

"Why does my place always become enemy territory…" Amane muttered.

Even at his parents' house, he had felt like he was in enemy territory, so he hadn't expected to feel the same way even in his own apartment. When Shihoko was around, Mahiru wasn't always on his side—sometimes, she would quietly team up with Shihoko against him, so Amane couldn't afford to let his guard down. This time, too, Mahiru had joined forces with Shihoko to whittle down his HP.

"Oh, that's because anywhere I go becomes my territory, no?"

"That's enough out of you, Mom. Seriously, you're a real piece of work."

"This is what I mean, Mahiru-chan. The way he tries to hide his embarrassment is adorable."

As Shihoko chuckled, adding, "They're only words, after all," Mahiru laughed along. It was at this moment that Amane's HP gauge had reached the red.

"You get along quite well, don't you?" Mahiru giggled.

"This isn't what you call 'getting along,' Mahiru…"

Noticing Amane's tremendous mental exhaustion, Mahiru chuckled softly and said, "That's how it looks from the outside," while winking at him adorably.

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Shihoko stayed for about an hour before gracefully leaving in a hurry, exclaiming that she had work the next day. The lively atmosphere quickly settled down, returning to one of calmness and tranquility.

Amane felt relieved that the usual peaceful atmosphere had returned, but part of him wished that Shihoko could have stayed for a little while longer, seeing as Mahiru enjoyed her company. However, since Shihoko

often made comments that would get under his skin, perhaps her early departure was actually for the best. If only she didn't tease him so frequently, Amane would have liked her to stay by Mahiru's side.

"Hehe, I'm glad to see that Shihoko-san is well." Mahiru leaned back on the sofa with a comfortable smile.

Amane, sitting next to her with a wry smile, took a sip of his now cold tea. "Ahh, well, she's always energetic, but it's nice to see that she's doing well. I just wish she'd calm down a bit, though. Like, actually."

"I think it's a good thing," Mahiru replied. "It's very much like her."

"Well, I guess you could put it that way."

"Hehe, you aren't good at dealing with Shihoko-san's lively nature, are you?"

"It's more that I'm not good with how I keep catching strays."

Mahiru, despite being partially responsible for powering up Shihoko's liveliness, simply laughed, unaware of the effect that she had. In Amane's mind, as long as Mahiru was having fun, then he had no intention of blaming her for it.

Yeah, I might have to learn how to better deal with my mom after all, Amane thought to himself. He sighed, knowing that it was something he hadn't managed to do in seventeen years.

"Shihoko-san seemed to be quite busy," Mahiru remarked softly, perhaps recalling their conversation and how Shihoko had hurriedly taken her leave.

"Yeah, she has some deadlines at work apparently. I'm just grateful that she made it here. Dad wanted to come too, but he's crazy busy right now, so he couldn't make it."

"Hehe, you're dearly loved, aren't you?" With a gentle, envious smile, Mahiru spoke in a heartfelt tone. Amane bit his lip slightly as he took in her words, while Mahiru simply gazed at him softly. "I can read you like a book, Amane-kun. You were worrying deeply about my meeting, weren't you?"

Amane stiffened, feeling as though a sharp knife were thrown at him right when he'd least expected it. Noticing his reaction, Mahiru smiled tenderly and said, "It seems I was right on the nose," in a voice ever so gentle. In reality, Amane should have acted as if nothing had been on his mind. Mahiru realizing the worries he harbored could come to burden her.

However, after seeing the expression she wore, Amane couldn't bring himself to just laugh and hide his feelings.

"That way of showing kindness is very typical of you, Amane-kun. Even so, I don't wish to add to your burden, so you didn't need to worry yourself over it," Mahiru said as she smiled at the awkward look on Amane's face.

It was as if she had seen through all of his thoughts. Mahiru's expression carried no trace of pain—instead, she processed everything calmly, ready to accept her situation and her reality.

"Amane-kun, you don't need to worry about it, okay? It's clear that my parents are the ones at fault. It's strange that they refuse to take responsibility for what they created."

"Yeah…"

"And besides, I was certain that my parents would never come, which is why I decided against telling them about the meeting. As a result, there was no way they could possibly attend," Mahiru explained.

"As I cut the very possibility of it happening myself, I had no expectations to begin with," she said.

"This time, I brought it upon myself," she said.

After laying eyes on Mahiru's fleeting, delicate smile, there was no way Amane could remain calm and composed.

"It's impossible to hold on tight to the extremely thin and fragile thread that is the possibility they might care about me. It would break far too easily. I don't want to endure the emotional strain of clinging on to such a slim chance, which would most likely result in me struggling in vain. This is for the best."

"Mahiru…"

"I don't need my parents to be present for a parent-teacher meeting. I can make decisions for myself." Mahiru spoke firmly, her voice clear and steady. With a pensive look, she gazed at Amane with a calm smile. The warmth she usually showed him was nowhere to be seen.

"Even without consulting with my parents, I know that there are no issues with my grades and academic performance. I also appear to have tuition insurance, so I'm not worried about the money. Plus, there are separate funds set aside for my university or future employment. In a

way…I'm fortunate that they have made sure that I won't encounter any financial trouble. Considering their lack of presence in my life, they have provided the best financial support. For that, I'm grateful."

Mahiru's words implied that besides financial support, her parents had given her nothing. She let out a sigh of self-deprecation. Even her breath, which should have been warm, felt almost cold.

"In fact, I'm a rather fortunate person. They brought a wonderful person in Koyuki-san into my life, and perhaps out of a minute sense of guilt, they ensured I never lacked anything. Thanks to that, I have grown up just like any other," Mahiru said.

Conversely, without Koyuki, Mahiru would have certainly grown up walking down the wrong path. Despite that, Amane still couldn't bring himself to feel genuinely happy about it all.

"It's not a big deal," Mahiru continued. "I can decide everything on my own without my parents directing me…so, you don't need to look so sad, you know?"

"Sorry."

"Why are you apologizing? Goodness me."

Amane knew that cheap sympathy, consolation, or agreement would only hurt Mahiru further. He could only accept her words and the invisible tears they carried. As he grasped Mahiru's slender hand, her warmth, now lower than usual, gradually mingled with his own.

I hope even a little of my warmth can become hers, Amane thought, firmly enclosing Mahiru's slightly trembling palm and gently moving closer to her.

It seemed Mahiru thought it unusual for Amane to initiate physical contact without hesitation. Her eyes widened slightly before she squinted with a shy, almost ticklish smile. "It's okay, don't worry. The way I view my parents won't change—it's too late for that now. It would be a lie to say I'm not hurt at all, but I wouldn't say I'm particularly saddened by it either. For me, it's just an ordinary, everyday thing."

"You feel that way, even though you know it shouldn't be considered ordinary?"

"Yes. The fact is, it has become my normal. There's nothing to gain from turning a blind eye to the truth. Eventually, it will all come rushing back one

way or another."

Mahiru probably thought she wasn't as strong as she believed herself to be, but to me, she's much more resilient and true to herself than I'd initially thought, Amane realized. Feeling this, he tightened his grip on her gradually warming hand.

"I've come to terms with it, so it's fine. Precisely because I had to spend time alone, I was able to meet you, Amane-kun. That is something I am grateful for."

"…I see." To Amane, Mahiru appeared so bright and endearing as she unraveled her feelings with such dignity. This time, instead of just holding her cold hand, he wrapped his entire body around hers and pulled her close. Her slender frame trembled with surprise but soon relaxed in his embrace.

Despite her small body, Mahiru had lived an honest life of integrity, never once straying. Simply relaxing into Amane's embrace made her feel secure, showing just how much she trusted and relied on him. After wiggling around to find a comfortable spot where she could see his face, Mahiru looked up at Amane with a slightly troubled smile.

"You're such a worrywart, Amane-kun. I'm not so weak as to break down from something like this. If I let things get to me every time, I won't be able to keep on marching forward."

"It's not about being strong or weak," Amane began. "…I just can't stomach how something so painful has become ordinary for the woman I love. It's…frustrating. I want to be there to protect you, but I'm constantly reminded that there are things I can't do anything about."

The environment in which Mahiru was born and raised, as well as her current family situation, were both beyond Amane's reach. The past couldn't be changed, and the present was out of his grasp.

No matter how dearly he cherished her or how strongly he wished to protect her, there was little Amane could do as long as he remained an outsider. To forcibly cross that line would mean trampling on Mahiru's delicate heart. Therefore, the only thing Amane could do now was to envelop her gently, ensuring her delicate points remained unscathed, while shielding her from unnecessary noise and harm.

“This problem is mine alone… It’s not that I’m rejecting your support. It’s an issue that I must confront myself. Only I, as the person involved, can solve it.” Mahiru understood that there was nothing Amane could do about it, nor did she wish for him to do anything in particular either.

Amane interpreted that Mahiru wished for him not to fix her problems, but simply to be her rock, never letting her hand go. As she quietly gazed at him from within his arms, Amane gently nodded softly.

“It’s impossible for me to fully understand all your feelings, Mahiru. After all, we were raised in two completely different environments.”

“I agree. Ultimately, I am me, and you are you. You can try to place yourself in my shoes, but you won’t be able to fully grasp how it feels.”

“Yeah,” Amane concurred.

Whether he liked it or not, that fact remained an irreversible reality. Amane was *Amane*, and Mahiru was *Mahiru*. They may have crossed paths and their lives may have intersected, but they could never become one. Mahiru, as an individual, could never become someone else, nor could anyone fully and flawlessly understand the nuances held in the depths of her heart. Her emotions were hers alone. Her thoughts were something only she could truly understand.

Comprehending this, Amane had no intention of forcing Mahiru to reveal her feelings, nor would he try to do something for her against her will.

“But I really love how you try to understand me, Amane-kun. How you stay by my side and watch over me without forcing your own views.”

“…Yeah.”

“I can tell just how much you cherish and care about me. Thanks to that, I always feel so blessed as a person.”

The words she uttered seemed to come straight from her heart. Mahiru, with a soft and innocent smile, nestled her cheek against Amane’s chest, enjoying his warmth cozily as she leaned into him. This gesture was her unique way of showing the highest level of pampering. In response, Amane gently kissed her flowing flaxen-colored hair and rested his forehead against the top of her head.

“…I’ll make you even happier, so if it ever gets too much, don’t forget to

tell me. You tend to bottle things up and say everything is okay."

"As I said, it's okay. Ah— I do mean it genuinely this time."

"…There are times when you say you're okay even when you aren't."

"I shall be careful from now on. I know that if I am hurt, it hurts you too. After all, that's just how much you love me, Amane-kun." Mahiru spoke with more clarity and unwavering confidence than ever before, undoubtedly accepting Amane's form of love.

After seeing her grow confident enough to say something so embarrassing, Amane's heart swelled with even more love for Mahiru. He held her tighter, wanting to melt into her warmth even more. Mahiru simply smiled and welcomed his embrace.

"If I were younger, desperate, and prone to getting upset, I might have said something like, 'You were raised with so much love, what would *you* know?' which would then lead to an argument."

"If you really had said that, then I wouldn't have any way to argue against it."

Amane knew himself that he'd been raised with an abundance of love and care from his parents, so if Mahiru ever said something like that, there would be nothing he could say to refute it. He could only see himself apologizing. However, even an apology could rub someone the wrong way depending on the situation.

No matter what was said, those who had something could easily provoke those who did not. This was a lesson Amane understood all too well from his own experiences.

"But saying that would only serve to hurt the both of us, so I don't intend to do so," Mahiru clarified.

"…You might not say it out loud, but haven't you felt that way before?"

"Well, I certainly can't claim that I never have."

Amane wasn't surprised.

In fact, he felt a strange sense of relief at how easily and clearly Mahiru confirmed what he had secretly feared. No one lived their life with only positive emotions, and realizing that Mahiru, who seldom showed the opposite, also had such feelings made him cherish her even more.

"Even if I were to complain, it's something that can't be changed or

improved. It would solve nothing. Blaming your environment, which is beyond your control, would not accomplish anything either, would it? I would regret it as soon as the words slipped out of my mouth. I'm sure of it." Mahiru's expression remained calm as she rationally explained, "I don't want to start a fight, nor do I want to hurt you. To begin with, it's only natural to have differences… My family lacked the affection found in most families, so we were the exact opposite of the majority. Many situations have reminded me of that fact. I had feelings of jealousy during elementary and middle school, and have since reflected on them all."

It's a miracle she didn't become jaded after all this, Amane thought, but he then realized that Koyuki's presence must have played a significant role.

"I haven't experienced the conflicts that come from being loved or how annoying meddling parents can be, so I can't really say anything on those fronts. That's why, although I do get a little bit jealous sometimes…I think I'm handling it all in a healthy way," Mahiru concluded. She looked at Amane worriedly, causing Amane to smile bitterly at himself and his own pitifulness.

Which one of us is worrying about who here…?

"Mahiru, you rarely let your emotions get the better of you, and I understand that you know your own feelings well and come to terms with them… Ah— Is it okay to say I understand you there?"

"Yes. After all, you're absolutely right… I can feel that you always keep a close eye on me," Mahiru said with a soft giggle.

"Of course I do," Amane replied. "You're the one I love—I'll always be watching you." Because she was the one he loved, Amane wanted to know her better. Because she was the one he loved, he wanted to be able to understand her. Because she was the one he loved, he wanted to make sure she was comfortable. He wanted to do things that made her happy. He wanted to keep her away from anything unpleasant.

There were many reasons, but simply put, because he loved Mahiru, he wanted to look after and protect her. He wanted to look beyond the surface and see her for who she truly was, so he made this clear without hiding it. Mahiru, nestled in his arms, squirmed lightly in response and repeatedly butted her head against his chest.

"…You're starting to resemble Shuuto-san more and more with how you can say things like that so calmly, Amane-kun."

"How did you even get that from this conversation?"

"I just did!"

When Mahiru suddenly brought up Shuuto's name, Amane felt a question mark practically appear above his head. Mahiru, however, turned away as if to say no explanation was needed and butted his chest with her head one more time.

She's just trying to hide that she's embarrassed, Amane thought. He gently patted Mahiru's back, to which she pouted slightly. Amane chuckled, thinking, *This is adorable too*, which appeared to have released Mahiru from her pouty mode. "Goodness me," she said tenderly, no longer trying to resist or protest.

"Still, I'm glad you think I'm acting more like my dad. He really is an upstanding man," Amane said.

"That's not quite what I meant, but you aren't wrong either, so I suppose that works. Be proud of it, okay? I'm sure Shihoko-san would say the same," Mahiru replied.

"Mom's head over heels for Dad, so I feel like the bar will be set pretty high."

"Hehe, who knows?"

When Amane looked into Mahiru's cheery face, he met her mischievous smile and contented eyes. Clearly in high spirits, she leaned back against his chest, making Amane tilt his head curiously. He naturally softened his expression and embraced the affectionate Mahiru warmly as she snuggled up to him. Together, they shared each other's warmth.

While fondly relishing the sensation of Mahiru nuzzling up to him with the endearing sweetness of a kitten, Amane suddenly voiced something lingering in his mind.

"Oh, by the way…"

"Yes?"

"Do you really think I take after my dad?"

"Yes, you're the spitting image of him. Um, not just in appearance, but especially in how you act and speak," Mahiru explained.

As they were father and son, it stood to reason that they resembled one another. However, Amane had asked that as a preface for another question he wanted to ask.

"If so, do you take after Koyuki-san?"

"Huh? M-Me?" Confused, Mahiru stammered in a high-pitched voice. The question seemed to be one she hadn't considered before.

"Yeah. After everything you've told me, it just makes me wonder whether you resemble Koyuki-san."

Personality and behavior could be determined by genetics, or they could be influenced by the traits of close people around you. While there was no telling which one was at play for Mahiru, she certainly didn't seem to resemble her mother, and from what Amane had heard, she didn't seem to take after her father either. Therefore, it wouldn't be surprising to think that she resembled Koyuki, who likely had a significant impact on her personal development.

"I—I'm not sure… Um, it's true that Koyuki-san has taught me many things, so in that sense, we may be similar… but it's not something you can confirm until you see for yourself…"

"Yeah, I guess you're right. But I bet you take after her."

"And you say that based on what…?"

"Intuition, I guess? I really do think you might be similar, though. Probably."

"Geez."

It might seem like a thoughtless or remiss statement to make, but strangely, Amane was certain that it was true.

Mahiru had mentioned that she admired Koyuki, describing her as a very elegant, kind-hearted, and gentle person. To Amane, Mahiru embodied those exact same qualities. Whether consciously or not, their similar behaviors made it hard to believe they weren't alike. Although Amane had no way to confirm this since he hadn't met Koyuki, he felt certain that she must be a wonderful woman, just like Mahiru.

"Thinking about it again, I'd really like to meet her someday. She's important to you, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is the person who took care of me the most and is very dear to

me. Um, it has actually been a while, so I would like to see her again. But she has her own circumstances, and considering her health issues, I can't impose on her. We do exchange letters occasionally, but…I would still love to see her," Mahiru replied.

"I see… Do you write regularly?"

"I do, although I only write roughly once per season to avoid bothering her out of the blue. I've kept all her letters safe. They are my treasures."

"Yeah."

Mahiru spoke with her cheeks flushed and a genuine smile. The sparkle in her eyes made it clear just how much she cherished Koyuki. Seeing how deeply Mahiru admired her made Amane even more eager to meet the woman who had such a profound impact on Mahiru's life.

"…Oh, I remember. I have a photo that Koyuki-san added in one of her letters. Please wait a moment, I shall go get it from my place," Mahiru said. She gently freed herself from Amane's loose embrace, stood up, and gave him a bright smile before heading to her apartment.

"Are you sure? You don't have to go out of your way…"

"You seem curious about what kind of person Koyuki-san is. Plus, I would like you to know more about her too."

"I mean, she's basically your surrogate parent… She's someone important to the woman I love, so of course, I'd like to know about her."

"…There you go again with that. Geez," Mahiru murmured. Even though they were Amane's genuine feelings, Mahiru pouted and puffed out her cheeks. However, her delight was unmistakable as her eyes relaxed with happiness. She hurried out of the room, her slippers pattering softly on the floor.

Since these items were precious to her, Mahiru must have kept them well-organized. She quickly returned to Amane's apartment, holding a cute box with the care one might use to carry a baby. After a brief, "I have returned," she sat on the sofa and placed the box on her lap.

The box was sized perfectly to fit letters. Mahiru gently removed the lid, revealing envelopes aligned neatly on the inside. There was a small note or memo at the top of the stack. Internally applauding her meticulous organization, Amane watched as Mahiru's pale-white fingers carefully

moved the memo aside to retrieve a specific envelope. Adorned with a lace pattern, the envelope was neatly cut, which made it likely to be opened using a letter opener. This made it easy for Mahiru to take the photograph which was placed inside.

Mahiru held out a glossy piece of paper and handed it to Amane. On its face was a picture of a woman holding a swaddled baby, a serene smile on her face. The woman wore a gentle and somewhat calm expression, and Amane guessed she was likely older than his own parents. She looked down at the baby in her arms with a smile filled with bliss and grace.

"This is Koyuki-san. She seems to be at her son's place with his wife and family, doting on her grandchild. Her son must have taken the photo."

"So that's why she's holding a baby… I knew it, though. I feel like she resembles you in some ways."

"It must be your imagination. We aren't related by blood at all."

Amane felt as though he could hear the voice in Mahiru's heart continuing after her, saying, *"How great it would be if we were,"* which pained him. Still, determined not to let her sense his feelings, Amane deliberately kept his tone light and cheerful.

"Hmm. If you ask me, this isn't about being related by blood. I think that after spending time together with someone, people start to resemble one another in certain ways. Like how they talk, how they think, and how they act."

Blood was not the only thing that shaped a person. While genetics certainly played a role, Amane believed it was Koyuki's support that had the greatest effect on the Mahiru he knew today. Seeing her photo only convinced Amane of this fact even more.

"At the very least, I think you smile just like Koyuki-san does," Amane said.

Mahiru had likely never objectively seen her own smile.

Not only did Mahiru not enjoy having her picture taken, but she rarely took photos herself. Worse yet, she often put on a forced smile when she knew a photo was being taken. She was unaware of the genuine smile she showed when she was alone with Amane.

Despite a fair amount of hesitation, Amane picked up his phone, scrolled

through his gallery, and tilted the screen toward Mahiru to show her. He had once captured a moment when Mahiru was smiling happily while spending time with him, but she had simply blushed and forgave him for taking the photo without ever looking at it herself.

Mahiru had refrained from checking the photo out of respect for his privacy as it was on his phone, which was a missed opportunity. Had she looked, she would have realized just how much she resembled Koyuki.

"You have such a beautiful smile, see? The way the corners of your mouths curl, the looks in your eyes, the way the edges of your eyes soften—they're all the exact same. I know it's just a photo, but the impressions you give are identical."

Displayed on the screen was Mahiru's smile, one equally as sweet and beautiful as Koyuki's. It was a smile showing such satisfaction it was as if she had gathered all the happiness in the world. Seeing her own genuine smile for the very first time, Mahiru stared intently at Amane's phone screen. She then touched her own cheeks with her fingers in disbelief, her eyes glancing back and forth between the photo of Koyuki and the phone screen.

"…This is the first time anyone has told me that."

"Well, probably because nobody else has seen it, right? If there isn't anyone else besides the two of you, then you wouldn't know. I believe there are some similarities you just can't notice yourself. If I met her myself, I'd probably be even more convinced."

While just a single photo wasn't enough to gauge everything, Amane was sure that his prediction would turn out correct.

"…Similar," Mahiru murmured. She reflected on Amane's words, savoring them. She exhaled and whispered, "I'm so happy," in a trembling voice before leaning against Amane's arm.

Mahiru looked down and hid her face as she pressed her head against him. Even without looking, Amane could tell that the expression on her face was not a negative one. He watched her as she held the photo up to her chest carefully so as to prevent creasing, and smiled. Quietly, he stayed by her side until she was satisfied.

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“Mahiru, it fell.”

When she looked up, Mahiru looked like her usual self, yet there was a hint of pride showing in her relaxed face as she carefully and delicately returned the fallen photo back where it belonged.

At that moment, a note placed on top of the bundle of letters had slipped off, which Amane casually picked up. The side with writing happened to be facing up, so his eyes naturally traced the ink adorning the small note. The words were penned neatly and skilfully, with a kind of elegance different from that of Mahiru’s handwriting. Written on the note were three lines: the first a series of Roman letters, the second a series of numbers, and the third a combination of kanji, hiragana, and numbers.

Amane caught a brief glimpse of the note, and after realizing he shouldn’t look too closely, he hastily looked away. Then, he gently placed the note back inside Mahiru’s treasure box.

“Ah, thank you,” Mahiru said.

Smiling away innocently, Mahiru didn’t find Amane’s reaction suspicious. She simply thanked him sincerely, closed the lid, and held the box close to her chest as if it were something precious.

Someone Mahiru treasured. An existence precious to her, which she had shown only to Amane. Watching Mahiru show the deep respect she felt for Koyuki, Amane patted her head, savoring her joy while trying to ignore the guilt that slowly welled up within him.

“…What should I do?”

Chapter 5

What Yet Lies Ahead

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

The next morning, Itsuki was sitting at his desk with an expression that screamed he was in a bad mood.

Usually, Amane arrived at school first, but today it seemed that Itsuki had set off unusually early. Judging by the redness on his face, he must have only arrived several minutes earlier, forgetting about how cold it was outside. Despite that, Amane could sense that Itsuki's irritation had eased somewhat compared to before the parent-teacher meetings. This meant that his meeting hadn't ended with the worst possible outcome.

"Mornin'," Amane greeted. "You don't look so hot."

"Morning. *That's* the first thing you say?" Itsuki replied.

Amane greeted him like normal, and Itsuki turned his eyes away from the window he'd been gazing out of, now looking toward Amane with a wry smile. After studying Itsuki's attitude, Amane confirmed the suspicions he had, and with a shrug, replied, "I mean, it was written all over your face. How was yesterday?"

"Huh? You really wanna know?"

"It's not that I *want* to know, but wouldn't you feel more awkward if I pretended not to notice or if I acted like I was avoiding it? Wouldn't you find it weird if I tried to be considerate?"

"Gotta say, I'm not sure how to feel about you knowing all that."

"Just embrace it."

Itsuki preferred people to confront him directly rather than showing him half-hearted consideration. If someone tried to walk on eggshells around him, it would likely end up upsetting him even more. Therefore, Amane believed it was better to ask him bluntly, even if he came across somewhat rude. Given the slightly relieved look he found on Itsuki's face, it

was clear that he had taken the right approach.

"Well, we didn't really get anywhere. He's dead set on me enrolling into a university he's already decided on himself, so we couldn't see eye to eye. I got scolded for picking my subjects for the entrance exam on my own."

"Ah…"

Amane had actually done something similar, but his parents wanted to support the choices he made, and Itsuki's father was one to disregard Itsuki's choices, so their results were complete polar opposites. Realizing this, Amane felt a little guilty.

"Even so, I've already submitted 'em," Itsuki said.

"So you're standing strong against him, huh."

"That's the best thing to do. If I show weakness, then my dad will definitely force me into doing what he wants. That's why I'm hoping to push through with all my might—well, you could also say that's the only option I have left."

Rather than moping around, Itsuki chose to defy his father. Sighing, he said, "Really, what a royal pain in the neck this is," but his eyes still shone with a hopeful glimmer.

"Luckily, Mom was actually on my side. She told my dad stuff like, 'See? You won't get anywhere trying to force someone that's standing up against you!' 'What did I say? If you force him too hard, he'll reach a breaking point and stop listening to you entirely!' and 'Just give it up already!' so things aren't all that bad," Itsuki explained.

"Your mom is something else, dude," remarked Amane.

"She's strong-willed, but she's also straightforward and decisive. Always speaks her mind clearly and hates anything illogical or unfair."

So far, Amane's impression was that she spoke more directly than any other mother he had ever encountered. It seemed that Itsuki—her child—felt the same way.

"I don't think my parents are like your average family," Itsuki began. "It's not that my mom doesn't care for my future, but she's extremely laissez-faire. She basically lets me do whatever as long as it's something I actually want to do."

"Well, you have her approval, so isn't that great thing for you?" Amane

replied.

"In exchange, though, she's all 'Work as hard as you can to make sure you pass. Since *you* wanted this, don't come crying back to us later. Always take responsibility for what you say.'"

"…I-I mean, that's wonderful, I think. Yeah…"

She has quite the way with words, Amane thought, but since she served as a source of motivation for Itsuki, he refrained from making any comments.

"Exactly. So I just have to work hard. That's all there is to it," stated Itsuki

"We both just have to do our best."

Next year, they will both be students taking university entrance exams. When all was said and done, all they could do was strive harder and do their best together.

"You've already decided what you want to do, right?" Itsuki asked.

"Kind of. I don't have anything specific in mind yet, but I do have fields I want to study in. Also, I just want to be able to stand on my own two feet. I'll find what I want to do after that, and if I can't make it into a career, I can always just make it a hobby instead."

"Having a clear goal is great. I bet you're super motivated because you want to spend more time with Shiina-san, eh?"

"Shut up."

"Heh heh heh, maybe you'll be living together for real in university."

"Hey, c'mon."

Now that Itsuki had perked up and began teasing him once again, Amane's cheeks started to tense up. At that very moment, someone with a calm voice could be heard chiming in. "Hey Itsuki, keep teasing Fujimiya like that and he might just give you a taste of your own medicine."

Turning to where the voice came from, Amane's eyes met Yuuta. He had his usual gentle look on his face as he took off the backpack he was carrying.

"Oh, Yuuta? Morn'," Itsuki said.

"Good morning, you two," replied Yuuta.

"Good morning," Amane greeted.

Calm as ever, Yuuta softly chided Itsuki with a "Take it easy, man," before

dropping his backpack onto his chair and returning to join them. "Anyway, what made you bring that up?"

"Ahh, we were talking about the meetings," Amane explained. "We were talking about our future plans when this guy decided to stick his nose where it doesn't belong."

"Bit harsh there, don'tcha think!?" Itsuki exclaimed.

"You tease Fujimiya at every opportunity, Itsuki. You had that one coming," Yuuta added.

"You have no intention whatsoever of taking my side, do you?"

"Nope." Yuuta shook his head casually, as if he'd just heard the most obvious thing in the world. Itsuki, pretending to be shaken to his core, staggered backward, but both Amane and Yuuta knew he was just putting on an act. They exchanged glances and let him do his thing.

"Everyone's been going on and on about the meetings lately, haven't they?"

"Yeah. I guess they're a painful reminder that our exams are approaching."

"How can you lot casually be so cruel?" Itsuki spouted, quickly recovering from his theatrical despair. The slightly resentful tone in his voice carried no real anger as he rejoined Amane and Yuuta's conversation. This was all part of their playful banter, something the three of them all understood extremely well.

Meanwhile, from a little distance away, Chitose and the others commented, "Maybe Ikkun actually enjoys getting treated like that?" and "He really does give off those vibes, doesn't he?" Amane only wished that they had at least been quiet enough for Itsuki not to hear.

"Kadowaki, your meeting is the day after tomorrow, right?" Amane asked.

"Yeah. I'm really glad that my sisters won't be with me that day."

"I bet they wanna tag along—!" chimed Itsuki.

"Aha ha… I absolutely refuse to let that happen."

Amane had never met Yuuta's sisters in person, but he had heard enough from others about how intense of a personality they had. As an only child himself, he couldn't help but feel a bit sympathetic toward Yuuta.

He really has it tough.

"Kadowaki, have you already decided on your career path?"

"Yeah, I'm aiming to get a sports scholarship. If that doesn't work out for me, then I'll just apply through regular admissions."

"You left your mark at your last tournament… It's totally possible for you, Yuuta," Itsuki replied.

Even as a second-year student, Yuuta had already achieved notable results in various tournaments, and Amane had even seen him on stage at award ceremonies multiple times. There was no doubt in his mind that Yuuta had the potential to earn the prestigious spot he was aiming for. Besides, not only was Yuuta excelling in sports, but he also had excellent grades, which gave him plenty of options to choose from.

"I hope I make it, but there are actually quite a few other guys at my level. I need to keep stepping up my game."

"Yuuta, you really undervalue yourself, don't you?"

"Undervalue? Isn't that Fujimiya's speciality?"

"*Hey!*"

"Ha ha, just kidding."

"See, even Yuuta thinks that's *your* thing."

"Oh, just zip it."

Amane himself acknowledged that he had a tendency to undervalue himself, but compared to before, he had now gained a lot more confidence. Even during times he felt unsure of himself, Amane could now recognize that and have a positive mindset. He had worked very hard to improve himself and had overcome many personal challenges.

Since their teasing was just another form of playful banter, Amane simply made a show of being slightly annoyed.

"There's no denying that I still have a long way to go," Yuuta continued. "My coach says I have a lot of potential and room to grow, so I need to keep working hard, both in sports and my studies."

"The track team sure has a hard-working ace."

"If I don't keep giving it my all, my spot as ace will be taken from me in no time. I'll never give up this position, not until I retire. As the team captain, I want to stand proud as I lead the members."

“Oh, right, you’re the captain… Must be tough.”

He must be even busier now, Amane thought, remembering that Yuuta had become the team captain right after summer break. However, Yuuta showed no signs of it catching up to him and casually said, “Well, everyone is capable already, so there isn’t much I need to do,” sounding thoroughly unconcerned. “Kazuya’s the vice-captain, and our coach is always there for us too. I’m happy to have such reliable club members—sometimes I feel guilty for not doing much myself.”

“They must’ve grown by following their hardworking captain’s example,” commented Itsuki.

“Right?”

“Praising me won’t get you guys anywhere, you know.”

“Just thought I’d try making you blush,” Itsuki joked.

Yuuta wasn’t the least bit shaken by Itsuki’s teasing grin and simply looked back at him with a smile just as bright.

“Really now? Then maybe I’ll try to make you blush too, Itsuki. Hey, Fujimiya, just the other day Itsuki actually—”

“I’m sorry. Please let me off the hook.”

Amane was in disbelief at how quickly Itsuki changed his tune. Seeing him apologizing profusely, Amane realized that Itsuki must have done something he wouldn’t want anyone else to find out about. Unluckily, the conversation derailed before Amane could get the details, but whatever it was, it was clear that it could be used as a potent weapon against Itsuki.

“What did you do? Or tried to do?” asked Amane.

“Nothing—just don’t ask.”

“Aha ha. Since Itsuki’s pleading with his eyes for forgiveness, I’ll spare him this time.”

“Kadowaki, are you actually the one who has the biggest hold on Itsuki…?”

There was no sarcasm behind Yuuta’s lighthearted smile.

Kadowaki could be a powerful ally to keep Itsuki in check. Although Amane imagined that he himself would feel awkward if he caught on, Amane was convinced of his strength. He turned his gaze to Yuuta, whose smile still shone brightly.

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Mahiru's parent-teacher conference was scheduled relatively late, so Amane passed the time by studying in the library. When he received a message from her saying that the meeting was over, he headed to their meeting spot by the shoe lockers.

Once again, Amane had taken the day off from work today. He didn't want to let Mahiru go home alone.

As the light from the sunset spilled through the windows beside him, Amane walked through the now considerably quiet school building, where he soon arrived at the entrance. Mahiru had already gotten there before him, already having changed into her loafers. She stood there with her smartphone in hand.

Through the open doors leaked the reddish hues of the setting sun, vividly illuminating Mahiru's flaxen hair. With no other students around, her standing figure seemed somewhat lonely.

"Good work." Wanting to say something, Amane called out to Mahiru. She was staring down at her phone, but immediately lifted her head and gave him a soft, gentle smile.

"Thank you for waiting. I'm sorry for making you stay behind."

As Mahiru hurried over to him and stopped at the edge of where she was still allowed to walk with outdoor shoes, Amane felt as if he could almost see a wagging tail behind her. Though he almost let out a sound of amusement, he thought that might seem strange, so he disguised it with a hum and gently patted her soft hair instead.

"No, it's totally fine. I stayed behind because I wanted to. In fact, that should be my line. It must have been cold here."

"That's just like you, Amane-kun. Taking the blame for things yourself so as to not make me feel guilty."

"Don't go getting me all figured out."

"Hehe, I can read you like a book, Amane-kun. As such, I would like to thank you."

"Don't sweat it." While he was glad that Mahiru understood his way of

thinking, it was also troublesome to have her see through everything. This time, the feeling of embarrassment won out.

However, it appeared that Mahiru had seen through even that. A soft, amused giggle escaped her lips. Feeling embarrassed, Amane turned away and opened his shoe locker.

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"…How did it go?"

After leisurely making their way home, Amane hesitated for a moment before asking Mahiru. She immediately understood exactly what he was referring to and let out a slightly troubled "Hmm." Despite that, her voice carried no trace of distress. This was likely because she had already come to terms with it in her own way, which was reflected in her cheerful attitude.

"It's quite difficult to describe how it went. As for how my parents were absent, it seems that the teachers had finally come to terms with the unlikelihood over the past year and a half. When I said that they weren't attending, our teacher accepted my answer, although not without a frown."

"Can't blame them, really."

"In reality, there's no longer anything I can do about it. I already assumed that they wouldn't attend." Mahiru said this in a matter-of-fact voice and looked to the ground, letting out a tired sigh as if to say, '*Goodness me*'. "Truth be told, it's a bit awkward if you worry about this. It's too late to change anything now. Despite me informing them in advance, the meeting proceeded with a gloomy atmosphere… It made me feel self-conscious instead."

"It's a touchy subject, so I think they're just unsure how to approach things."

"I understand that, but seeing them trying to tiptoe around the matter isn't exactly pleasant, especially when I'm not actually concerned about the situation."

"Even so, our teachers are bound to be worried. Did any problems arise during the meeting itself?"

"Well, I have been working fairly hard. They had no concerns about my

academics at all. Since my grades and behavior are also a non-issue, they said that I should easily be able to enroll in my university of choice, considering its entry requirements. Ideally, I'd prefer to secure a recommendation for early admission, but if that doesn't work out well, I plan to apply normally."

Their teacher had a fair evaluation. Had Mahiru been considered a problematic student, then so would most of the student body. If there was one thing, it was that she wasn't a part of any clubs, which was something that Amane had been told as well. However, since Mahiru had been actively taking practice exams to pursue her qualifications, it seemed it wasn't a major drawback.

What Amane was curious about was the path Mahiru wished to take, a topic they had both deliberately avoided discussing deeply until now.

"What course are you thinking of, Mahiru?"

"Ideally, I'd like to enroll in the same university you are aiming for. Though, we would be in different departments," Mahiru replied casually, leaving Amane stunned. Showing a faint smile, she added, "Ah, I didn't choose this only because I wanted to be with you, Amane-kun. I made the decision on my own for myself. I wouldn't choose my course based on romance."

"Yeah. I know you wouldn't let others decide your future, Mahiru."

She giggled, "I wouldn't go that far…but there are actually some things that make me hesitant."

"Like what?"

"For example, um, say we both get accepted into our university of choice… Our current apartment might be a bit inconvenient. That is, the campus would be quite the distance from here. I do like this place, though, given the area."

"Hmm, yeah, it would probably take over an hour to get there one way," Amane agreed. "That's not awful, but a shorter commute would definitely make things easier."

Their university of choice was located within the 23 wards of Tokyo, but since they lived outside of the wards and had to walk a fair distance to the nearest station, commuting from their current place would take quite a bit

of time.

Although they wouldn't lose as much time compared to those commuting from another prefecture, they still wanted to minimize their travel time as much as they could. The shorter the commute, the more energy they would have for their classes. Living closer would provide a greater sense of ease and peace of mind.

"Then again, if we stay at student dorms, I won't be able to see you as often, Mahiru. Plus, I'm not really a fan of sharing a living space with others. I don't like shared bathrooms and toilets, and I don't like too much noise. It's just not my kind of thing."

"I feel the same way," Mahiru replied. "I would feel lonely if I couldn't see you, Amane-kun."

"So, that only leaves us moving into a different apartment together… Mahiru, am I selfish for not wanting to be apart from you?"

Despite the fact that they were dating and living next door to each other, Amane was inherently opposed to the idea of being separated due to university. Mahiru shook her head gently, causing her flaxen hair to ripple ever so slightly, and blushed. It seemed she felt the same way.

"U-Um, I was actually thinking the same thing myself… I too would like to stay by your side if possible."

"Sure. That makes me happy."

If we end up moving, we'd better discuss things with my parents first, Amane thought, being realistic. He was ecstatic to know that she didn't want to be apart from him.

Since he had already informed his parents that he would be attending a local university and they had agreed to him continuing to live on his own, Amane figured that getting permission to move wouldn't be too difficult as long as the rent remained the same. However, he was concerned about whether they could find a place with the same rent, good security, and enough space—even if he compromised on the size of the rooms. And even if they chose a location a bit further away from the university to save on costs, there would still be a significant difference between living inside and outside Tokyo's 23 wards.

Considering these factors, Amane realized that moving wouldn't be an

easy feat.

What to do, then…? Letting out a thoughtful groan, he brought his hand to his mouth. Mahiru looked up at him with a concerned expression.

Seeing the look on her face, an idea suddenly popped into his mind.

"It would be much easier if we just lived together," Amane blurted out.

"Huh—?"

Amane heard Mahiru's bewildered voice, but he continued to speak. "If we lived together, we could keep our rent relatively low. Also, it would make it easier for me to walk with you to and from university."

It was a straightforward idea: renting a larger apartment together would undoubtedly make the utilities and other expenses cheaper compared to renting two separate apartments. It wasn't a bad idea at all. In fact, Amane felt that his parents would probably be on board—if not outright encouraging—about the idea of him sharing a place with Mahiru.

As Amane casually checked the rent for properties near their desired university on his phone and did some calculations, Mahiru responded with a vague, "…Well, yes, I suppose so," neither fully agreeing or disagreeing.

"Mahiru?"

I thought it was a great idea though.

Mahiru's expression was tense and far from cheerful. Instead, it painted a feeling of confusion and embarrassment.

"So, you really don't mind living together with me, Amane-kun?"

In response to the words Mahiru whispered faintly, Amane dropped his phone onto his thigh.

…Was that— Did I just…suggest we should live together?

Having mentioned it so casually, Amane hadn't given much thought to the meaning of his own words. Still, that was indeed the implication behind them, and Mahiru had clearly interpreted them in that way too.

Once he became aware of it, his thoughts quickly became a chaotic swirl, almost as if they were boiling over. Overwhelmed by embarrassment, frustration at his own lack of awareness, and guilt for confusing Mahiru, Amane hurriedly waved his hands in an attempt to clear things up.

"S-Sorry! That was really selfish of me, wasn't it!?" Amane exclaimed. "You need your own private space too, and this isn't something I can just

decide on my own! I was just thinking about our future, and that, well, you know, we might be happier if we stayed together, and that way, we could focus even harder on our university life… Um, s-sorry."

Realizing that he had been making decisions on his own without confirming Mahiru's wishes, Amane desperately tried to convey his apologies to Mahiru with frantic gestures. However, after seeing his reaction, Mahiru's eyes softened slightly.

Instead of angry, she appeared more exasperated.

"When you apologize like that, it makes it sound as though I was against the idea," Mahiru voiced.

"Th-That's not what I meant. Um, I just couldn't deny that I was saying something selfish."

"When you say 'selfish', are you implying that you disregarded my wishes for your own convenience?"

"Exactly."

"…If so, then that wasn't *selfish*."

He thought he must have misheard her.

Mahiru's response was far too beneficial—too favorable—for him that Amane even doubted his own ears. When he briskly looked at Mahiru, her cheeks were as red as they could get. She peered up at him with hope reflecting in her moist, glistening eyes, as if awaiting his response expectantly.

Amane wasn't so dense as to mistake this for rejection. Realizing that Mahiru desired to spend time together, to live under the same roof, made him feel as though a fire had been ignited within his chest. The heat spread through his body, rushing up to his eyes.

"It's okay for me to…accept that invitation of yours, right?" Mahiru asked softly.

"…Yeah."

Amane's heart raced, a loud thud reverberating through his body as he processed what she had said. Mahiru had spoken through the rising embarrassment, voicing her words in a demure fashion. Amane replied quietly with a nod of his head.

"That makes me very happy."

“Me too.”

No matter how much time he had spent with Mahiru, no matter how close they had become, he still couldn’t alleviate the awkwardness he felt in this very moment. It was only natural, given that they had just confirmed their desire to live together. For now, Mahiru visited and spent most of her time with him, but living together was on an entirely different level.

Despite all his denials when Itsuki teased him about living together, Amane had unconsciously been wishing for it. After realizing that fact, overwhelming embarrassment rose up within him. But at the same time, the joy of Mahiru accepting his wish washed away that embarrassment, leaving only pure joy.

Mahiru shyly met Amane’s gaze. She wore an innocent smile tinged with embarrassment.

“I’m already so happy, it means that we could greet each other every day, say good night to each other before bed, and leave together from the same house. Just imagining it feels so wonderful. It makes me incredibly happy.”

As Mahiru giggled away contentedly, her words reflecting her emotions perfectly, Amane was captivated by her bashful yet fulfilled expression. But then, she seemed to realize something and looked at Amane with a hint of worry.

“Ah— Should I, um, maybe, g-greet Shihoko-san and Shuuto-san? You’re their precious son, it wouldn’t be right to decide this without their approval…”

“Hmm, well, you have a point. I do think Mom and Dad would be happy about it, though. If that’s the case, should I also greet Koyuki-san…?”

Mahiru’s biological parents, especially her father, were a conundrum, and her mother seemed largely uninterested in her. Amane deliberately avoided mentioning them to avoid dampening her mood. Fortunately, she did not notice his careful choice of words. If push came to shove, Amane was ready to reach out to Asahi and declare his desire to take Mahiru away. He wanted Mahiru to only focus her attention on happy thoughts.

“I’m sure Koyuki-san is worried sick about you, and I can only imagine she would be anxious about you living with a guy she doesn’t know well. We should probably greet her sooner rather than later.”

“I—I would like to go as well. I want to meet her again and introduce you, and catch up with her by telling her stories all about us… So we should definitely make some time for that.”

“Y-Yeah, let’s do that.”

They continued talking about their plans for a while, but it was clear they were getting ahead of themselves as they hadn’t even been accepted into university yet. Realizing how premature their discussion was, they both couldn’t help but laugh at their own eagerness and hasty assumptions.

Even so, the fact that they had made this firm promise for the future was enough to fill both their hearts with great hope and immense happiness.

“We both need to give our best effort on our entrance exams, don’t we?”

“Yeah, I’ll definitely try my hardest to pass. There’s plenty to do.”

“You just added to your own workload, though.”

“Well, this is something I chose to do while keeping entrance exams and the like in mind, so I’ll take full responsibility and see it through until I achieve my goals, and I won’t slack on my studies either.”

As for his part-time job, Amane had already accepted it as something he needed to strive for in balance with his other responsibilities. He had no intention of using it as an excuse to slack off. He chose this path because he believed he could handle it.

“Since it’s your decision, Amane-kun, I won’t make any comments,” Mahiru said. “All I can do is support you and help you out day by day.”

“No, Mahiru, you should prioritize your own needs first. The things I’m doing are for my own convenience.”

“Well, that is what I want to do. I will continue to do so within reason,” Mahiru insisted

“...You really won’t budge on that, huh?”

“Hehe, that’s just the kind of person I am.”

“Definitely.”

Over the past year, both Mahiru and Amane had slowly come to figure out and understand each other’s personalities. They knew that once either of them made a decision, they wouldn’t back down so easily. They both cherished one another, and this mutual respect for each other’s choices was crucial—it was the secret to living together in harmony. As he realized this

once again, Amane held Mahiru's hand, who had leaned in close to fawn all over him.

...A chance to talk, huh?

Amane recalled their earlier conversation, and he mulled over those words silently in his mind. He decided that once Mahiru went home, he would finish writing the half-written email saved into his *draft* folder.

Chapter 6

Seeking Advice from Seniors

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

The months of November and December were an incredibly busy period for every high school student, and Amane was no exception. From parent-teacher meetings, to regular exam preparation, and even a mock exam held by an external private company. With both regular exams and Mahiru's birthday approaching in the first half of December, Amane had no choice but to take quite a few days off from his job. As he didn't have much time to spare for work, he could only squeeze in shifts whenever he could.

"Oh, that time of year already? You youngun's sure have it rough."

As nighttime drew near, the shop was more or less empty, which gave them some time to chat and catch up on recent events. Miyamoto, who was currently working the same shift as Amane, nodded nostalgically while carefully washing a siphon by hand as it couldn't be put in the dishwasher.

"You're still plenty young yourself, Miyamoto-san."

"Well, I've already overcome the exam period, you see. I'm a *seasoned veteran*."

"—And next up is job hunting to *overcome*, right?" Oohashi butted in.

"That makes two of us…" rebuffed Miyamoto.

Oohashi, who had just returned after seeing off what seemed to be the final customer of the day, had just earned a retort from Miyamoto. Her expression changed to one of frustration, looking as though she wanted to talk back to him.

Oohashi was typically a kind-hearted and cheerful person, but she interacted with Miyamoto in a particularly rough manner. To Amane, it seemed as if they were on quite close terms, but he knew that if he said that out loud, they would definitely deny it together. Thus, Amane kept his thoughts to himself.

“How did you two do on your entrance exams, if I might ask?” he asked.

“Stop! Don’t remind me…” Oohashi lamented.

“Ah…”

“As for me, well, I just studied like normal, and then passed like normal. Of course, I did have to study many times harder than I did when I first entered high school,” Miyamoto explained.

“Fujimiya-chan, beware. This guy may look like a flashy playboy, but don’t be fooled—he’s actually really smart without even trying. Best not to trust everything he says, or else it’ll come back to bite ya,” warned Oohashi.

As Amane never found the opportunity, he had never asked his seniors about their grades. According to Oohashi, Miyamoto had excellent results, although she admitted the fact bitterly.

“Well, I did have better grades than you, yeah. I took my studies pretty seriously.”

“You wretched fashion playboy!”

“*Hah hah hah*. Say what you will. Hard work will never betray you.”

“Whatevs.”

Despite them being old friends, Oohashi’s sharp retorts made Amane feel slightly on edge. However, since Miyamoto didn’t seem to pay them any mind, he figured that this must be how they normally treat one another.

Itsuki and I talk to each other the same way too, Amane reflected, *so I guess there’s no need to worry*. Even so, he couldn’t shake his feeling of unease. *Maybe Miyamoto-san actually likes getting the cold shoulder?*

It wasn’t his place to comment, but Amane had a vague idea about the feelings Miyamoto held toward Oohashi. Although he hoped that Miyamoto’s feelings would be reciprocated, he knew better than to rudely stick his nose into other people’s business. As such, all he could do was watch over the situation alongside Souji, who also understood the situation Miyamoto was in.

“Things get super busy around this time of year. There’s exams, career counseling, and then Christmas to think about. Oh, and by the way, adjusting your shifts around your exams early on would help out the owner big time.”

“Oh, I’ve already submitted which days I can do in advance,” explained

Amane. “I plan to reduce my hours by quite a bit before my exams so I have more time to study.”

With that, Amane had also factored in extra time required to prepare for Mahiru’s birthday, but that didn’t mean he could take every day off. He was determined to make great use of the time he did have in order to manage everything efficiently.

“All right, gotcha. If we know in advance, then we can prepare things ahead of time.”

“And about your shift on Christmas… I’m sure you want to spend the day with your darling girlfriend, right? You don’t want to neglect her, do you?”

“Well, that’s…”

Amane had heard that workers without a partner often ended up working the Christmas shifts, but he never imagined that he would be the one forcing the rearrangements. In a way, it only stood to reason that if he made plans for Christmas, coworkers that had no such plans would have to cover his shifts. Now realizing that fact, Amane felt a wave of guilt wash over him, and he felt a keen urge to apologize for the trouble.

However, in spite of that, Miyamoto gave him a bright smile. “It’s fine, don’t worry about it. Go have fun with your girlfriend.”

“But then only I will have the day off…” Amane lamented.

“Don’t worry about it. There’s someone who works the morning shifts who you haven’t met yet, and they already told us that they’d cover for you. The owner increases our wages over Christmas up until the end of the year, so they want to earn some extra cash. I’m going to take more shifts as well.” Miyamoto laughed, “During a busy season like this, all establishments in the restaurant industry inevitably become extremely busy. The owner, Fumika, compensates for this hectic period by raising the hourly wage and giving us additional bonuses on top of that. For those of us without any plans, it’s the perfect chance to pad the wallet.”

“After all, you don’t have a partner, do you~?”

“Shuddup. Not like you do either.”

“How do you know we broke up?”

“You kept going on and on about it. You don’t remember?”

"N-Now, now, please calm down." Whenever the two of them were left to talk to each other, they, for some strange reason, began to argue about one thing or the other. Stepping in, Amane turned back toward them and tried to break them apart. Then, he changed the subject. "Actually, there's something I would like to ask."

"Ah?"

"What is university life like? I have been to open campus events before, and while I can get a feel for the atmosphere there, I don't really know how it feels for the people who actually go there."

"Ahh, yeah, high school students always get caught up about that."

Amane's attempt to change the subject was a success. Both Miyamoto and Oohashi wore thoughtful expressions devoid of spite, their eyes drifting off randomly in no particular direction. Amane refrained from saying how similar they were out loud.

"It's hard to put it into words, but it's not like a continuation of high school…or anything like that. While this doesn't go for every department and course, classes aren't as regular as in high school. They're still on a schedule, but my classes weren't as tightly packed as they used to be. The exam period was *far* more crammed."

"Yeah, why'd they give us so many classes all at once anyway? Felt like the busiest time of my life."

"Maybe you just weren't on top of everything?"

"Quiet, you."

Why do these two always start bickering whenever they talk? Amane wondered, but he simply chalked it up as their own unique way of communicating. According to Souji, who was long since used to it, "Those two always default to arguments," and Amane couldn't help but think that he was right on the money.

"I really enjoy the lectures for subjects that I'm interested in, but the lectures for the mandatory courses that don't interest me are, quite frankly, pretty boring. There's no way around it, though."

"Literally nobody likes those… They're important for getting credits, but still. I'd love to just drop them completely. I've even thought about skipping them."

"It's important to get the fundamentals down, like I keep say—"

"Okay, *so what!?*"

"All right, all right." Amane tried to calm the two down.

"Well, unlike high school, it's more proactive. The main focus is on academic exploration, and you have to manage how you do all your work yourself, so there's a lot more self-accountability. Since to a certain extent, you get to pick what you want to study, it's important to choose wisely. Also, if you're not a morning person, be weary of the first period. It'll wreck you. The most dangerous time is when you get used to university and let your guard down."

"That's sincere advice. Daichi almost overslept a bunch of times himself."

"That was my own foolishness."

"Yeah! Take that, ya big dum dum~!"

"Like you're one to talk. You overslept plenty of times yourself back in high school."

Their exchange was starting to feel like a married couple comedy act, which made Amane realize that he had grown quite used to his seniors.

"Again, it depends on the university, but living on campus is a great experience," Miyamoto continued. "It's not exactly a dreamy paradise, but it's way more relaxed than you might think. Whether or not you join any circles is up to you, but you can gain a lot of knowledge and connections you wouldn't normally… Well, having people you can talk to and share information with can be useful, but you do get people we call 'Circle Crushers' from time to time who like to ruin others' relationships and expose them to danger, which can get real scary real fast."

"Hey, don't spook us like that," said Amane.

"It really is scary, you know?" attested Miyamoto.

"Uh, sure, I guess…y'know…"

"I don't want to hear more, so let's just end this here, okay?" The two of them had given Amane a glimpse of some abyss unknown to him—just hearing about it was enough to give him the chills. Miyamoto and Oohashi nodded solemnly, clearly having witnessed something truly awful.

"Getting tangled in love affairs can be terrifying," warned Miyamoto.

"I will keep that in mind," Amane replied.

After all that, Amane etched into his mind that the biggest hurdle he might face was not lectures or assignments, but relationships with people. He resolved to protect himself so as to avoid getting caught up in any strange situations.

"In any case, I have no intention of approaching any girl besides my girlfriend. Even if I do join a circle, I'll remember to keep an appropriate distance. I don't want to be suspected of cheating."

"Fujimiya, you're smart enough to not involve yourself in anything weird. But even so, I can't shake the feeling that you might get yourself tangled up in something messy without realizing it."

"Could you not say something so ominous!?" Amane shuddered and pleaded for mercy, but Miyamoto simply laughed in response, "Ha ha ha, I'm just joking around." However, the joke didn't quite land as one to Amane, and the fear still struck him.

"Anyway, if anything happens, don't be afraid to consult us about it. I'd like to think that I'll have finished my job hunt by then."

"Yeah, it'd be best if nothing happens at all, Fujimiya-chan."

"…Hearing all this makes it quite hard to chase the dream of university life," Amane admitted.

"You were dreaming of it?"

"No, not at all. To me, it's more of a stepping stone to become a working adult, a necessary part of the process in getting a job… Is it really okay to think about it that way? Enrolling into university to secure a job instead of advancing in the pursuit of knowledge?"

For Amane, university wasn't something to be enjoyed—he saw it more as additional preparation required to score a job.

Of course, he had the mettle and enthusiasm to study the field he was interested in, but he wasn't necessarily doing it to make it into his career. For Amane, going to university was more about enriching his future options in life.

While he understood that universities were fundamentally institutions specifically for academic research, he couldn't commit himself entirely to the pursuit of knowledge. This made him wonder whether that was truly acceptable, but Miyamoto, who was currently a university student, replied

to Amane's question in an exasperated tone.

"Only a serious guy like you would worry about something like that. Isn't it perfectly fine? Actually, I don't think you'll find many high school students who are so determined that they'll say 'I really wanna get this job! So I'll go to this university and study this course!' Most people choose to study something that interests them or because they think they'll have a hard time getting a job without a degree. You also have people who go just because everyone else they know is going too, or because it gives them a longer break before having to find a job."

"Ugh, that hits close to home."

"Rino, you ought to be grateful to the lady who made you cry back in high school."

"I *am* grateful to my mom, believe it or not. And I have goals now, so there's no problems there."

"Oh, really?"

"Get lost."

"…Well, everyone has their own reasons, and it'd be silly to judge them for it. Instead of focusing on why, think about *what* you want to achieve at university and how you want to use that in your life. At the end of the day, after graduation, we all have to walk on our own two feet, and our results will shape who we are and how we are seen. If you're satisfied with that, then that's that. Don't concern yourself with what others have to say."

With a gentle pat on his back from Miyamoto, the worries weighing Amane down lightened ever so slightly. These were not the words of a parent, nor those of someone with shared interests, nor even those of a very close friend. They were the words of a senior both at his part-time job and in life, and that was precisely why his words struck a chord in Amane's heart, making him feel as if a refreshing breeze had swept right through him.

If he had heard those words from Shihoko or Itsuki, Amane may have taken them in a different way, but hearing them from Miyamoto made all the difference. He felt grateful to have heard those words from him.

"Oh, are you guys discussing university, perhaps?"

As he quietly mulled over Miyamoto's words, Fumika appeared from the

back with leisurely movements. She must have been working in the area where the employees usually didn't go, as this was the first time he had seen her today. She wore her usual gentle and sweet smile, and a fragrant aroma of baked sweets, seemingly infused with her soothing presence, wafted through the air.

"Hey, Owner. Good work today."

"That smell is delish."

Fumika chuckled, "I was working on a recipe for a potential limited-time cake in the back. I'm thinking of putting it on our menu over Christmas."

"Ah, no wonder we haven't seen you over here."

Fumika had been busy working in her private kitchen in the back, which explained the scrumptious aroma she carried. She was quite particular when it came to her confectionery, and only the cakes that were improved upon over time to meet her high standards were offered to customers. Apparently, she created a different Christmas cake each year and spent considerable time perfecting her recipes behind the scenes.

"Please, have mercy on me," Oohashi cried. "I've had no snacks and now I'm low on energy… It's nearly dinnertime too… *_Sniff sniff_*, that smells *so* good."

"My, well that's perfect timing—I was just in need of a taste-tester. Just don't tell the other part-timers, okay? Keep it a secret when you try some."

"My…god…" Oohashi dramatically clasped her hands together as a sign of worship, causing Fumika to laugh out loud.

Noticing Amane looking over, Fumika smiled at him and beckoned him and Miyamoto over. "Both of you come on over too. I hope you don't mind sweets."

"Hooray! Your cakes are delish."

"My, you flatter me."

"No, they really are."

As Fumika laughed softly, Miyamoto and Oohashi walked ahead. Noticing that Amane hadn't moved, Fumika directed her gaze towards him.

After a brief pause, Amane looked directly into her eyes. "Um, Owner, do you have a moment?"

"Sorry?" Fumika looked utterly puzzled, having no idea what Amane

wanted to say.

Amane closed his eyes for a moment, contemplating whether or not he should speak.

Despite his sudden introduction, Fumika had hired him almost on the spot. She had been flexible with his shifts, provided her own coffee beans to Mahiru, and had generally taken good care of him. He owed her a lot. Without her, the comfortable working environment he was currently enjoying wouldn't have been possible.

Because of all this, Amane wasn't sure if it was okay to rely on her even more—but he was certain that she was the right person to ask.

Feeling a bit guilty as Fumika curiously looked at him, Amane hesitated but then began to speak, determined to secure a crucial piece for the upcoming *X-Day* and ensure its success.

"…Do you happen to know of any cake recipes that even an amateur could follow?"

✧ + ✦ + ✧

Having finished his part-time job and returned home as quickly as possible, Amane watched Mahiru's graceful yet lively steps as she hurried over to him. Seeing this, a sense of relief washed over him.

He had messaged Mahiru aboard the train to let her know he might be home late, but since he was later than usual, he thought she might have been worried nonetheless. As it turned out, his concerns had been right on the money, though fortunately, she didn't appear to be too anxious about it.

"Oh, welcome home, Amane-kun. You're a little late tonight, aren't you?"

"I'm home. Sorry, I had to stay behind to help with a few things. It wasn't a big deal. Did anything happen while I was gone, Mahiru?"

"Hmm, nothing of note, no. If I had to say, then I suppose the stew I was preparing for dinner turned out perfectly, if I do say so myself."

"Really? I can't wait to try it."

Amane was pleased to hear that the simmered dish Mahiru had prepared while waiting for him had turned out so well, so as he changed

into his slippers, he couldn't help but relax into a smile.

Mahiru wore a smile brimming with confidence. "Please look forward to it."

Even with the snack Fumika had allowed him to try, there was no way it could fully satisfy a high school boy's appetite. As he was eager to eat Mahiru's dinner, Amane had hurried home as fast as he could.

"I'm looking forward to our dinner tonight," Amane said with a smile as he took off his coat. Mahiru naturally took the coat from him—or rather, she half-modestly snatched it. It looked like she wanted to put it away for him.

"Ah, thanks for taking care of my coat." Although there was no need for her to go to such lengths, as she seemed eager to do it, Amane had no reason to refuse and simply let her take the coat.

Mahiru looked at his coat with a smile. Then, all of a sudden, she shifted her gaze to Amane's hand. "…Is that a red spot on your finger, Amane-kun?"

Mahiru—truly, an exceptionally observant and attentive girl.

Earlier today, Amane had indeed tinged his finger ever so slightly. That said, it was only for a brief moment, and the burn had cooled down quickly without even leaving a blister. As that part of his skin had only turned a slight shade of red, Amane hadn't expected her to notice anything.

"Ahh… I may have burned it on the kitchen griddle slightly. It was only for a moment, so it's just a minor burn, really. I treated it properly too. It's just a little red."

"…Does it hurt?"

"Now? Not that much. It was my careless mistake, so I'll just deal with it."

Mahiru adorably made her displeasure known with a pout, despite it not being something she needed to worry about. In an attempt to soothe her, Amane gently slid his hand along the silky strands of her glossy, flaxen hair. While he used that hand that had burned, there was now no longer any pain even when he touched something.

"Don't worry, it's totally fine. My seniors said that minor burns happen all the time when you work in a shop that handles food."

"…Please, just be careful not to injure yourself seriously, okay?"

"I'll play it safe so I don't make you worried, Mahiru."

“Excellent.”

Amane also wanted to avoid causing unnecessary worry for Mahiru, so he swore to himself to be more careful and to ensure he doesn’t repeat the same mistake.

In response to Amane’s earnest promise, Mahiru shot him a concerned look. “Amane-kun, your well-being comes first,” she then said, before going to put Amane’s coat away in his room. As he watched her go, Amane headed for the washroom to wash his hands after coming home.

He felt a twinge of guilt for not mentioning the exact cause of the burn.

Chapter 7

A Crucial Preparation Period

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Now that the meetings had come to a close, students were now required to prepare for their upcoming regular exams, which were set to take place from the end of the month until the beginning of the next.

With the preparations for Mahiru's birthday, his job, and the typical pre-exam studying to juggle all at once, Amane now found himself with very little time to relax. However, it was by no means an unpleasant time for him. On the contrary, it brought him a sense of fulfillment.

"Man, this is so depressing. We've got meetings one day, and exam prep the next," Itsuki sighed as he gazed at the stack of exam preparation handouts kindly provided by their teacher.

Depending on the subject, some teachers would hand out summaries of topics covered in the exam as a way to encourage the students, which they would gratefully use. However, the sheer volume of these materials often left many of them feeling overwhelmed. Just by looking at the amount of handouts, it was clear that there was a mountain of information to memorize due to the exam's wide scope.

"There's so much more pressure than last year. It's really making me worry about my grades now. It's a lot to handle… But even so, the scope this time around is brutal. Though I guess that's only to be expected with how fast-paced our classes have become."

"This is still *way* too much…" Just like everyone else, Chitose came over with a pile of handouts, showing a dejected expression that seemed unfitting for a young girl. Sitting next to her, Mahiru wore a bitter, wry smile. Amane deduced that Mahiru must have seen just how much Chitose was dreading the exam.

"No, like actually. I can't do iiit," Chitose groaned. "This can't be possible!"

"Yeah. I'm not really a fan of this either, I guess," Amane agreed.

"Amane, you say that, but you always have really good grades and high marks…"

"Well, that's because I pay close attention in class," Amane replied.

"*Oof*… Your confidence…. It's blinding…"

Despite Chitose acting so defeated, there wasn't much Amane could do besides help her study. Since one's scores ultimately reflected the daily effort they made to study, Chitose had no choice but to persevere on her own.

"You should really try working up a bit more motivation, Chitose… Math's the only subject that you obviously don't like," Amane suggested.

"But then what am I supposed to do? I don't have a clue how I can start liking it."

"The answer is different for everyone. Personally, I quite like math. At least with the topics we study, the answer can always be derived one way or another. They're like puzzles—and for me, it's fun to apply formulas that you've memorized to find the solutions."

"I guess I'm kind of the same way too," Itsuki chimed in.

"But I can't seem to derive the answers at all!" Chitose complained.

"Try memorizing all the formulas first—*then* we'll talk," said Amane.

"*Hmphh!!*" Chitose pouted.

"Chitose-san, your problem is that your fixation on your lack of ability is making you lose motivation to try. You don't usually struggle with memorization, so why can't you remember the formulas for math?"

"Just seeing numbers makes me go '*Ugh!*'"

"U-Um, I don't believe I can help with that…"

At this point, Chitose's aversion to math was so strong that it could almost be called an allergy. Mahiru, who had taken on the role of her tutor, looked helplessly over at Amane, silently pleading for assistance with a troubled look.

Without any effort and motivation from Chitose herself, Amane believed it would be impossible for her to make any progress. The only solution at

hand was to find a way to spark her enthusiasm.

"Let's start by making you memorize the formulas that'll definitely appear on the exam. Once you get the basics down, it should at least keep you from failing. I don't want to see a friend end up in remedial class hell."

"*Noooo!!*" Chitose cried.

"Don't start. You're *doing* it."

"*Uwaaah!* Mommy Mahirun, Daddy's being mean to me!" Chitose cried once more. She clung onto Mahiru tightly, but given her taller stature, she hardly looked like a child. However, she was clearly and deliberately acting the part.

"I don't recall having a huge kid like you. Also, don't cling to Mahiru," Amane urged.

"You jelly?" Chitose returned.

"Sure, sure. *Totally*."

"…I'll give in if you admit you're jelly."

"Is it just me or are you having fun with this?"

"It's just in your head," Chitose replied, grinning.

She was very clearly enjoying the situation, and it was no surprise that Amane suddenly felt a headache creeping up. In stark contrast to her earlier childish tantrum, Chitose's attitude was now extremely playful as she casually turned her body away.

Chitose then muttered, "So you didn't deny the part about you being *husband and wife*," under her breath. Amane immediately shot her a sharp glare, effectively silencing her. As he filed away the stack of handouts they'd been given, he let out a quiet sigh.

Amane checked his schedule on his phone, mentally organizing his plans. As he didn't have any shifts today, he could take it easy.

Just as he did so, Chitose suddenly asked, "By the way, what are you gonna do with your job? We have exams and stuff."

"Well, for now I've put my name down like usual. I try to keep up with my studies every day, and I've taken the day before and the day of the test off for any final preparations."

"You seem confident you can handle it."

"I have Mahiru to thank for that. She's been teaching me a bunch of stuff

at home, and she's really good at explaining things."

Although being good at studying didn't necessarily equal being a good teacher, Mahiru excelled at both. She was exceptionally skilled at teaching topics clearly.

Thanks to her thoroughly grasping the material ahead of time, Mahiru understood the key points of each problem and could accurately pinpoint where someone might be struggling. She would then provide examples and hints to guide them towards finding the solution themselves. While subjects that focused heavily on memorization tended to reward those who made the effort to study constantly, for any other subject, Mahiru's meticulous explanations ironed out any topics that Amane had issues with.

"That's how it was for me, but to understand things quickly, you first need to have a solid understanding of the basics—a foundation," Amane explained further.

"That's why we call it a foundation," Mahiru added. "It is something you build upon."

"Quit telling me the painful truth!" Chitose groaned.

If that's painful, then you only have yourself to blame—was something Amane deemed too harsh to say. Nevertheless, Chitose must have sensed what Amane was thinking from the look he gave her. She responded with a deflated expression, as if all the energy had been drained from her.

"Also, I have a senior at work who's great at studying, so I get a bit of help from him when it's slow. I really think you've got to have friends, Mahiru, and a senior helping you out."

"Ugh… My brother can't study to save his life… He won't be of any use at all."

"He'd probably cry if he heard that, Chi," Itsuki teased.

"He's made me cry plenty of times before, so this much is no problem!" As if saying, '*Good grief. With brothers and sisters, you never know what's gonna happen next*,' Chitose shrugged and made a waving gesture with her hands. Amane guessed that she likely had plenty of her own thoughts about the subject.

Although Amane knew that Chitose had a very good relationship with her family, so there was nothing to worry about on that front, he was still

somewhat concerned about her grades. He silently prayed that she would find the motivation to improve.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

“Your schedule’s packed. Sure you’ve got it covered?” Itsuki asked, concerned.

The group had split off, with the boys and girls each acting separately. Amane and Itsuki both stayed behind in the classroom while Chitose had taken Mahiru to a nearby store. As Amane wanted to discuss his plans face-to-face with Itsuki, he’d asked Chitose to inconspicuously bring Mahiru elsewhere. But given her worries about the upcoming exams, he was quite concerned about taking up too much of her time.

Amane nodded. “Yeah, I’ll manage one way or the other. At this rate, I should be able to keep balancing things just fine, and it’s turning out to be a valuable experience.”

“Ah, the power of love…”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Sure, sure.”

This kind of exchange had long become a routine for them, and after quickly brushing it off, Amane checked to make sure there was no one around who might overhear and potentially leak the conversation to Mahiru before moving onto the main topic.

“By the way, do you think you can handle what I’ve asked?”

Amane had relied on Itsuki plenty of times before, but this time, besides helping with preparations, he had also asked him to do something only he was capable of. Wanting to give Mahiru as much joy as possible on her special day, Amane entrusted Itsuki with a certain special request—one made possible only by where Itsuki worked and what his job entailed.

“I mean, sure, I can do it, but my manager would definitely do a better job of it than me.”

“You might be right. But even so, I want you to do it.”

Of course, Amane understood that a professional could do a better job

than Itsuki.

Even so, Amane wanted him to do it.

Amane had said that sincerely, but in return, Itsuki pulled a strange face. His cheeks and lips tweaked oddly, then he let out a deep sigh. It was still far too early for the sun to set, but his cheeks reflected a color reminiscent of the sun's evening glow.

"…You really had to say that, huh?" Itsuki complained.

"Yep. I *really* had to say that."

"Ugh. Do you have no shame? Damn it, this is embarrassing me now."

"Ha ha ha."

"You piss me off, man."

"Get as pissed as you want… I trust you, so I'm counting on you here."

"You already know I can't betray that trust, damn it. Fine, whatever. I'll do my best to meet your expectations."

"Sure. Thanks."

Itsuki's willingness to do everything he could for someone else, whether it was for Mahiru or Amane, was something Amane truly felt proud of and was grateful for. Despite all the teasing, Amane genuinely appreciated how Itsuki always acted out of his best interests. He could never thank him enough.

Amane thanked him from the bottom of his heart, but Itsuki, feeling neither anger nor dissatisfaction, began to frown sulkily and heaved yet another sigh. He deliberately gave an exaggeratedly irritated look as if to hide his embarrassment.

"…Seriously though, it's like you would do anything for Shiina-san. You're incredibly dedicated to all this, maybe even audacious."

"Audacious? I'll take that as a compliment."

Normally, one might take that negatively, but that wasn't necessarily the case. It could also be taken positively. It showed that Itsuki recognized Amane had grown confident enough to boldly ask for help.

I really have changed. Before, I never would have even considered seeking help from others like this, Amane thought nostalgically as he reflected on Itsuki's words. Itsuki watched him with a complicated expression, to which Amane looked back at him while wearing his typical smile.

“I’ll admit that I’m being audacious, but I won’t take it for granted. You’re always helping me out, so the next time you’re in trouble, I’ll definitely be there to listen. If there is anything I can do to help, I will have it done… If you’re willing to lend a helping hand, then I will ensure to return the favor.”

Sure, Itsuki would tease and make fun of Amane, but he was always there watching over him, lending a hand when needed. If Itsuki ever found himself in a place of trouble, it would only be natural for Amane to reach out and help him up, just as Itsuki had done for him.

“…One day, I’ll lean on you so hard I’ll bring you down with me.”

“I’m working out, so there’s no way you can make me fall.”

“…How clever of you.”

“Ha ha.” *So I’ve been dancing in the palm of his hand this entire time*, Amane thought, chuckling lightly. As the embarrassed Itsuki looked away and diverted his gaze out the window, Amane too looked away for a brief moment.

“So, do you think we can all match our schedules?” They both stayed quiet for some time, gently immersing themselves in the tranquility around them. However, as they couldn’t very well sit in silence forever, Amane brought up the topic that they had originally intended to discuss. Though the favor he asked of Itsuki was an important one indeed, the requests he had for their other friends were equally as significant.

“Chi and I can make it,” Itsuki answered. “I’ll check with Yuuta soon, but he should be fine. As for Kido, well, you’re closer to her than I am. I think it would be faster for you to ask her yourself.”

“Okay, got it… I can only hope that she’s free, though.”

“She’ll probably come since it’s for Shiina-san.”

“But if she really can’t make it, then we’ll have to manage with whoever is available. I don’t want to inconvenience anyone.”

“I doubt they’d see it as an inconvenience. We’re all friends here, and it’s not every day that you ask us all for help. Once they realize that they can make you owe them one, I’m sure they’ll be happy to lend a hand.”

“…I hope so.” Even without being told, Amane could tell that Itsuki deliberately added that little joke to tease him even further. He couldn’t help but laugh to hide his awkwardness. Itsuki, exasperated, sighed and added,

“That’s exactly what I mean,” before bumping his fist against Amane’s shoulder.

“Are you really sure, though? Chitose and everyone else might want to celebrate on the actual day too.”

Just in case, Amane had asked Mahiru a while ago if it was okay to tell Chitose and their other friends about her birthday, to which she agreed. When asking for their help, Amane gave them a quick rundown on the situation. The issue was that the favor he had asked of them would essentially result in Amane keeping Mahiru’s special day all to himself. This meant that everybody else would have to delay their individual celebrations for her birthday.

“Do you think everyone would be okay with that?”

Noticing Amane’s concerns, Itsuki responded with the single phrase: “You’re such an idiot,” dismissing all of his worries in one blow.

“At the very least, Shiina-san’s priorities lie with…well, this might sound bad to say, but her happiness is tied to you, Amane. Chi also said, ‘What matters most is that Mahirun is happy,’ and I’m of the same opinion. Also…”

“What?”

“She then said, ‘I’ll let the *boyfriend* be her number one.’”

“Who does that girl think she is…”

Amane couldn’t help but burst into laughter at how Chitose made it sound as though Mahiru belonged to her. Nonetheless, he felt genuine happiness knowing that Mahiru had become such an important person to Chitose.

Initially, Mahiru much preferred to stay alone—she even actively avoided building close friendships. But now, she had a friend she could trust.

That was undoubtedly a source of great happiness for Mahiru.

And for Amane, it was the same.

“Then, don’t mind if I take the place as her number one.”

Feeling truly grateful for all his friends’ consideration and kindness, Amane accepted their feelings wholeheartedly. Itsuki nodded at him fondly, as if thinking that this was exactly how things should be.

“All that’s left is for me to do what I can.”

Chapter 8

And so, the Important Day Arrived

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

What lay beyond their exams was, of course, Mahiru's birthday.

Having managed to balance his part-time job, test studies, and birthday preparations, Amane finished his exams with most of his plans already set in place. Incidentally, his classroom had been reduced to a mere bestrew of corpses, which served as proof of just how hellish this round of exams had been. Chitose was so genuinely exhausted that she had Mahiru worried for her well-being, but all Amane could do was hope that the test results wouldn't cause a wave of panic to spread among the rest of the class.

The week-long break immediately after said hellish exams coincided with Mahiru's birthday.

It was currently the day just before the break—in other words, the day before Mahiru's birthday—and Amane's busy schedule had begun to reach its peak. However, there was one thing he had to convey to Mahiru, something that could potentially hurt her if left unsaid. Amane straightened his posture and turned to face Mahiru, who was sitting next to him.

During their slow time after dinner, Mahiru now often worked on textbook exercises. Today was no different, as she diligently engaged in what had become her usual self-study routine. Having finished grading her own answers for the exams, she seemed to be already thinking about the upcoming mock tests. It appeared she had no awareness that tomorrow was her birthday, acting just as she always did.

"Mahiru-*san*."

"Yes?"

When he called her name, Mahiru closed her reference book without hesitation and looked up. Sensing that Amane was acting differently than usual, she straightened her posture and turned to face him. However, she didn't seem to have any idea what he was about to say, for a curious and puzzled expression could be seen from her every feature.

"May I ask you not to come into my house tomorrow until I call you?"

"Why?— …Oh, yes, I see. That would be okay."

Although she hadn't been consciously aware of it up until now, Mahiru immediately understood from Amane's actions and readily agreed, her expression changing as if to say, '*Oh, right. I forgot about that.*' It wasn't that she wasn't looking forward to her own birthday, but she mustn't have been particularly conscious of it either. This was something rooted in Mahiru's own awareness, and there was nothing Amane could do about it, nor did he want to force her to think otherwise.

For now, relieved that he could secure enough time for tomorrow's activities without causing any misunderstandings, Amane looked deeply into Mahiru's eyes, which still seemed somewhat detached from the present.

"It would pose a slight problem if you came over before I managed to finish my preparations. I want to welcome you with everything set perfectly, so I hope you understand."

Mahiru giggled. "I understand. But still, I see you are asking me this very directly."

"I did say from the very beginning that I would prepare something, so there's no surprises here. I ask you openly and sincerely: please, give me some of your time."

On the day itself, he had so many things to do that he would be swamped. If Mahiru came over to his house, it would be utterly impossible to prepare without her noticing. Besides, it was a given that he would want to spend time with Mahiru on her birthday. Since he intended to properly celebrate and give her the surprise of her life, he needed to eliminate any chance, even a tiny one, of prioritizing his immediate desires over the preparations.

As if seeing the enthusiasm brimming within him, Mahiru widened her

eyes before letting out a gentle breath and giving a soft, amused smile. "Then, all I need to do tomorrow is wait eagerly, right?"

"Yeah. I can't say for sure that it will meet your expectations, but I want to celebrate your birthday in my own special way."

"Honestly, celebrating my birthday already makes me more than happy."

"I know that, but even so…."

No one understood better than Amane just how much Mahiru cared about him. He knew that simply being by his side was enough to bring her happiness. However, while the happiness she felt with him was also significant, it was her birthday, an occasion that came only once a year. Amane wanted to make it a birthday that Mahiru herself would truly enjoy.

"Even so, I still want to make you feel like you're on cloud nine, Mahiru. Let me give it my best shot."

"…In that case, I will keep my expectations high."

"Ah— …I'll try my best."

Of course, he felt delighted and excited for Mahiru to have grand expectations of him, but at the same time, the question of whether he could fully meet those expectations slowly gnawed at him from the inside.

"The way you lose confidence this far in is very typical of you, Amane-kun."

"Having no confidence was my default state."

"Goodness. But you have updated since then, haven't you, Amane-kun? You've learned to have more confidence in yourself now, right?"

"When it comes to you, Mahiru, I'm always extra, *extra* careful."

Amane had spent a month preparing for Mahiru's birthday and had left no stone unturned, but he still couldn't say for sure that it would make her happy.

His desire to make her happy and his wish for Mahiru to experience the culmination of his preparations were both sincere and unwavering. His lack of confidence was solely a result of him not wanting to disappoint Mahiru's expectations. On top of that, there was a certain plan he had, one that blew the very concept of caution out of the water, which further added to his anxiety.

"…I'll try my very best to make you happy, Mahiru. So…"

“So?”

“May I recharge a bit first?”

Amane’s day tomorrow was packed to the brim with work, but he couldn’t see Mahiru until all the preparations were complete. He needed energy beforehand, but he wouldn’t be able to *recharge* until everything was over. Thus, hoping for a chance to recharge now, he asked her for permission to cuddle. Mahiru blinked cutely and then laughed, clearly amused.

“You don’t need to ask for permission, you know? You may do it whenever you would like.”

“Well, um, this time I thought I should ask you properly.”

“So earnest… All right, you can recharge as much as you want. In return—”

“In return?”

“Tomorrow, it will be my turn, right?” As Mahiru gently reached out and pulled him closer by the back of his head, Amane nodded and followed her lead, burying his face in her shoulder.

Tomorrow morning, I’ll wrap up what I need to do in the kitchen, prepare the room, and then check my emails to reconfirm my schedule for the day.

Whether everything went smoothly depended on Amane’s efforts and how well Mahiru received them.

I’ll have to prepare as best I can tomorrow, Amane vowed. He nuzzled his cheeks against Mahiru, enjoying her sweet scent, and closed his eyes for a bit of recharging.

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This day was one of the top three busiest in Amane’s life so far.

First thing in the morning, he stood in the kitchen, putting the skills he had honed through his special training to the test. In the afternoon, he called in reinforcements to help decorate the room and held a meeting with the person involved with the biggest surprise of the day. Amidst all this, he continued to stay in touch with Mahiru to ensure that she never felt lonely while he worked on the preparations.

Juggling so many tasks simultaneously, Amane was on the verge of feeling overwhelmed. However, compared to what Mahiru usually managed, it was nothing. Silently praising Mahiru for her multitasking prowess, he diligently continued to set things up.

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After such an intense and hectic time, the sun had completely set.

By the time he finally felt satisfied with what he'd done and glanced at the clock, it was already around the time when he would usually be having dinner. Outside the window, the sky reflected a myriad of colors shifting from crimson to a gradient of deep indigo and dusky blue.

He had been worried about what he would do if he didn't make it in time, but he was deeply relieved to have finished his preparations—albeit just in the nick of time. Amane rang the doorbell of the house next door to call Mahiru, who had been waiting for his signal.

Mahiru, who opened the door immediately after the doorbell rang, looked to be fully prepared in her own way.

When he glanced through the crack in the door, Amane noticed a vase with flowers placed on the shoe cabinet. This sight put one of his worries to rest, giving way to another sense of relief.

"I-I've been waiting for you," she said.

Mahiru came out of the door in a slight hurry and spoke nervously. Seeing this, Amane couldn't help but chuckle. Mahiru's cheeks promptly turned a faint shade of pink upon realizing what he was laughing at and awkwardly looked away.

"…P-Please pretend you didn't see that."

"Why's that?"

"W-Well, um, because…don't you think it's embarrassing if I'm all excited and giddy about it?"

"Huh? Doesn't that just mean you were really looking forward to it? That makes me happy, you know."

If it had turned out to just be a one-sided celebration, it would have come as a big shock to Amane, and he would likely be quite embarrassed.

However, just knowing that Mahiru was excited and eagerly waiting for it made him extremely satisfied. He wasn't sure if he could meet her expectations, given how eagerly she had been anticipating his visit, but he was confident that he had prepared everything as flawlessly as he could.

All that remained was to show her the fruits of his labor.

It seemed that Mahiru had also prepared herself thoroughly, as her outfit was particularly cute and much more elaborate than the loungewear she would typically wear. Taking her hand, Amane asked, "Are you all set on your end, Mahiru?" She squinted her eyes shyly and quietly replied, "Yes."

Leading Mahiru, who was carrying only a small purse, back to his house, Amane noticed her blink in surprise once she realized that all the lights were turned off, except for the ones by the entrance.

"…Huh? It's pitch black," Mahiru said.

"It would be no fun if you could see everything from the entrance, right?"

Even though there was a door separating the entrance hallway from the living and dining room, it had glass panels fitted, so you could still see inside. Since he had gone to all the trouble of planning and executing everything in secret for Mahiru, slacking off on the final touches was, of course, out of the question. To deliver a proper surprise, the magic of contrast was essential.

"So, if it's all right, could I cover your eyes for a bit? It might be a bit scary when you can't see, but I'll be right here. Don't worry and let me guide you."

Mahiru replied with a giggle, "If that's the case, then I trust you completely, Amane-kun." Her quick nod was surely a sign of her strong trust in Amane.

Without any hesitation, and even before Amane could cover her vision with his hand, Mahiru immediately closed her eyes.

She could at least be a little cautious… Amane thought. He then slipped his hands around her back and under her knees and lifted her up into the air. As always, the light weight of her body made him seriously worry whether she was really getting enough to eat. With one hand still free, he opened the door to the living room and turned on the lights.

Mahiru still kept her eyes closed, apparently intending to wait until Amane told her it was okay to open them. Relieved by her trust, he carefully guided her to the birthday seat he had prepared on the sofa, ensuring she wouldn't get hurt as he gently lowered her onto it. It seemed she knew where she was from the distance walked and the feel of the seat, as she sat up straight with practiced ease.

"Ah, please sit still and don't open your eyes just yet. Can you promise me you can wait just a little longer?"

"Hehe, don't treat me like a child. I understand that you want to show off what you have prepared in all its glory. I can wait in anticipation for a little while longer."

"Sorry, sorry. I appreciate having such an understanding girlfriend."

While he thought she might actually be a bit too understanding, her intelligent and perceptive side was also very characteristic of Mahiru. Smiling wryly, Amane stood up and gave a quick glance at the paper bag next to the sofa as his last step of preparation, which contained the items he wanted to give to Mahiru, ensuring that nothing was missing.

"Everything is in place. You can open your eyes now," Amane said gently. Mahiru immediately yet slowly opened her eyes, as if she had been waiting keenly for this moment.

Her eyes, slightly squinting as if not yet adjusted to the light, gradually revealed themselves.

What did she think of the decorations in this room, which she had just entered for the first time today?

"This is…" Her quiet voice trembled slightly.

Without needing to ask, Amane could tell what she was referring to from where she was looking and the way in which her eyes sparkled.

"Itsuki, Chitose, Kadowaki and Kido all helped me decorate the room. Um, you did say it would be fine if they found out about your birthday, right? I couldn't have made such stunning decorations all by myself, so I asked them for help and they happily agreed. They all have way better taste for this kind of stuff than I do, so I'm incredibly grateful for their help. What do you think? Isn't it cute?"

"Wow… It's so adorable."

“I asked them to go wild with the decorations, and this is what they came up with.”

With the help of the few friends Mahiru trusted, Amane had transformed the living room into a birthday-themed setting within just one day.

The theme was: *a fun birthday party, just like the ones she had longed for as a child.*

The walls were adorned with numerous bundled balloons and paper flowers with matching colors. Additionally, a large LED light spelling out *HAPPY BIRTHDAY* was affixed to the wall, further adding to the festivity. From the ceiling hung crystal glass ornaments, swaying in the warm air and occasionally scattering soft, dazzling light when illuminated. On the sofa where Mahiru was seated, her favorite stuffed animals were adorned with ribbons, cutely dressed up and eagerly awaiting the star of the day.

One might believe that with this many decorations, it may have resulted in the room looking gaudy or uncoordinated, but that could not have been further from the truth. The decorations were done in soft warm colors to avoid clashing, and thanks to the thoughtful arrangement and color scheme, the room had a calm yet distinctly pop atmosphere.

Even Amane, who considered himself to be fairly indifferent to such decorations and had even seen them being prepared, couldn’t help but let out a gasp of admiration upon seeing the finished room. For Mahiru, it must have been an even bigger surprise.

Seeing the room’s decorations glitter and diffuse in her wide-open eyes, Amane immediately broke out into a smile, knowing he had evoked the reaction he was so hoping for. However, he still had many birthday surprises in store, so it wouldn’t do for her to think that this was all.

“And this here is your birthday bouquet. I asked Itsuki to arrange the flowers.”

Their living room had been completely transformed to suit her tastes, and Mahiru was curiously looking around in awe. Still smiling, Amane picked up the bouquet that he had placed out of sight earlier. He gently handed it to Mahiru, who was momentarily taken aback by the sudden gesture.

Since he aimed to create a birthday that would delight Mahiru as much as possible, the bouquet was naturally stuffed with her favorite flowers and colors. Though he had a general idea of her preferences, he enlisted the help of Chitose and Ayaka to pinpoint her exact tastes. Thanks to their cooperation, he was able to prepare a birthday bouquet that was likely close to perfect in her eyes, for which he was deeply grateful to both of them.

"Is that why Chitose-san and Kido-san were…?"

"You figured it out, huh. Yeah, Chitose and Kido were trying to secretly research your tastes… They were really enthusiastic about making you happy."

Especially Chitose, whose enthusiasm was off the charts.

In her words, in order to *"make Mahirun happy~,"* Chitose had subtly and naturally gathered all sorts of information. Even knowing that Amane was preparing something, Mahiru hadn't been suspicious or felt that anything about their conversations were out of place. It made Amane think that Chitose might actually have a knack for being a detective or something similar.

This ability to slip past someone's guard and get close to them was one of Chitose's greatest skills and strengths. It was something Amane admired and wished he could emulate, even though it seemed impossible.

“I don’t think everyone appreciates fresh flowers, but you have a vase in your entrance hallway, don’t you, Mahiru? I happened to notice it whenever I came to get you, so I figured you must like them.”

“I see you have been paying close attention to me.”

“Well, you are my girlfriend, after all.”

Amane was half-expecting her to say, *“In that case, you should have already known my favorite flowers,”* but he hoped that Mahiru would cut him some slack in that regard.

Since he wanted to give her a bouquet full of only the flowers she loved, it was essential to research and check the range of flowers that was available in the current season.

Does she like it? Amane glanced at Mahiru. Ever so gently, she was cradling the bouquet close to her chest, careful not to let it fall apart. Her eyebrows were relaxed in a tender expression.

“…It’s so beautiful, it would be a shame to see it eventually wither away,” Mahiru said.

“Milady, I have also prepared some silica gel so you may preserve it as a dried flower.”

“Hehe, how thoughtful.”

“Well, of course. I want you to enjoy them until the very end. Even dried flowers may crumble one day, I want them to make you happy for as long as possible.”

“Thank you. I will enjoy its beauty both while it’s fresh and while it’s preserved… Every time I see them, I will think of you, Amane-kun.”

“Hearing you say that makes me really happy.”

“…It will remind me that you’re always with me, even at my own apartment,” Mahiru whispered in a voice so sweet.

Faced with her endearing response, Amane couldn’t help but force his lips together and hold his now rapidly beating heart by gripping his shirt. While it was gratifying as a boyfriend to know that she would think of him when she looked at his gift, hearing it directly from her made him feel a bit embarrassed. Unable to help himself, he scratched his cheek awkwardly.

Mahiru held the bouquet with a dreamy expression dearly, gazing at it as if it were something truly precious. Amane's lips twitch with a mix of frustration and embarrassment.

"…I'm happy you like it. Well then, I, uh…kinda need to finish preparing dinner, so I'll get to that now!"

Mahiru, still holding the bouquet and smiling shyly, watched as Amane stood up, using the continuation of the birthday celebrations as an excuse to step away.

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Amane putting a few meters between himself and Mahiru seemed to have done the trick in calming his racing heart. He began plating the dishes he had prepared in advance and setting them on the dining table.

Since Mahiru most likely had a vague idea of what he was making from the smell, there would be little surprise or novelty in his choice of dish. However, since this was meant to celebrate and honor Mahiru, a familiar taste would probably be the way to go.

Focusing on Japanese cuisine with a hint of Western seasoning was a choice made specifically because Mahiru was one to prefer milder, less extravagant flavors in her food.

"You put so much effort into preparing delicious food for my birthday, so now it's *my* turn," Amane declared. He smiled at Mahiru as she took her usual seat at the table before doing the same.

Although his skills were still a far cry from Mahiru's, he had done his best to prepare a meal crammed with her favorite dishes, hoping to please her as much as he could.

Mahiru was by no means a picky eater, but while she could eat any kind of food, she did have a preference for certain flavors. Generally, she preferred dishes with gentle and refined seasoning, leaning more toward those that brought out the natural taste of the ingredients and the flavor of the broth using a minimal amount of salt. Bringing out those flavors proved to be more challenging than preparing dishes with strong flavors.

Strong flavors could often be adjusted and, in the worst case, masked

with seasonings. However, with milder flavors, that wasn't an option. Making the most of the natural taste of the ingredients and actually enjoying the taste of the ingredients themselves were two different things, and each required distinct cooking methods and seasonings.

Therefore, mastering the style of seasoning that Mahiru preferred was a long and challenging journey.

Even so, I want to master the art in the future.

Not being able to make the favorite dishes of the person he loved made Amane feel ashamed as a boyfriend, and this feeling only grew due to the fact that Mahiru could prepare dishes tailored to his own tastes perfectly.

Though he believed the food turned out well, Amane quietly felt ashamed of his own incompetence, thinking that he still had a lot of room to improve. Mahiru intently observed his expression.

"…It's delicious," she said. Mahiru gracefully brought the bowl to her lips and quietly sipped the soup. A gentle smile spread across her face, and then she let out a soft sigh.

Even the broth was intricately prepared from scratch, following the method Mahiru had thoroughly taught him, so it should have been seasoned exactly to her liking.

His expectations were not disappointed, for Mahiru continued to eat her meal with a gentle expression on her face.

"I'm glad it suits your taste. Honestly, I was really nervous."

"I have critiqued your cooking before, but I have never had any complaints."

"Yeah, you aren't wrong, but like, worrying about whether you'll enjoy it or not is a different thing entirely, don't you think?" As he muttered this while breaking apart his simmered daikon radish filled with shrimp paste with his chopsticks, he heard a somewhat troubled voice respond from across the table.

"That's true, but… You know, Amane-kun, your cooking skills have improved at a remarkable pace, haven't they?"

"As for my skills, it's just that they went from the negatives to around fifty points. Your skills would be more like one or two hundred points. I could never catch up."

“I would be at a loss if you managed to catch up so easily.”

“I doubt I could even if I spent my whole life trying. To begin with, your cooking will always be number one for me, so it doesn’t matter how good my cooking becomes. But that aside, I’ll keep working hard to make the best dishes for you that I can.”

“…There you go again.”

“Geez.”

That *“Geez”* was meant not to reprimand him but was rather a sign that she acknowledged it was just part of Amane’s nature. It also implied that she was not at all displeased—in fact, it meant that she was quite pleased. This was something he had come to understand well over their time together.

Amane flashed her a broad grin, prompting Mahiru to widen her eyes in surprise. She quickly looked away with a dazzled expression, and with a wriggle of her lips, muttered, “Honestly, Amane-kun…” under her breath.

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“Thank you for the meal.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

They quickly finished their modestly portioned dinner in no time at all.

Mahiru wasn’t exactly a super light eater, but considering what awaited them next, it was clear that she wouldn’t be able to finish everything if he served her too much too early. So, without her noticing, he had prepared a slightly smaller portion for her.

Amane had decided to make a Japanese meal partly because it was Mahiru’s favorite cuisine, but also because the traditionally small bowls and colorful presentation helped him adjust the overall impression of the meal and have smaller portion sizes. However, it seemed that Mahiru hadn’t caught on.

“…I never thought you would do so much for me,” Mahiru admitted.

After insisting that he would handle all the cleanup, Amane guided the guest of honor—Mahiru—to the sofa. She had seemed a bit displeased by it, likely wanting to offer her help, but when Amane returned from washing

the dishes, she murmured these words with a deep sense of emotion.

"Well, you pour your heart and soul into something for your lover too, don't you, Mahiru?"

"*Hmph*. Th-That may be true, but…"

"If anything, you could say that I've done all this because I wanted to, not so much just for your sake."

In the end, everything he did was driven solely by his own self-satisfaction. This made him hesitant to use such a convenient and perfect-sounding phrase as *"for Mahiru's sake."*

"So yeah, this is something I'm doing on my own initiative."

"…You really do have a habit of doing that, Amane-kun."

As if to chide him, Mahiru playfully slapped Amane's upper arm. Upon realizing that he still wouldn't yield, she then showed him a complicated smile—one that perfectly reflected her feelings of helplessness, resignation, and happiness.

"…But, today, you've made me really happy. Everything is just so…"

"Ah, sorry. Could you just wait a moment?"

"Huh?" Mahiru's eyes widened at being interrupted, but this was something he couldn't turn a blind eye to.

"It feels like I'm about to wrap things up, but this isn't all I have planned. Your birthday isn't quite over yet, is it now?"

Mahiru blurted out a confused "Huh?" but for Amane, this was just the start of today's main event. He wouldn't have spent nearly a month preparing just for the decorations, bouquet, and a homemade dinner. He wanted to make Mahiru happy, and had been running around with the help of the kind people around him. He had yet to show her the true fruits of his labor.

As Mahiru was quite a modest person, she already looked completely satisfied. But today, Amane wanted to bring her so much joy that even that modesty of hers would be blown out of the water.

"Could you close your eyes one more time?"

Since the surprise would be spoiled if she kept her eyes open, Amane made this request for the second time today. Mahiru tightly shut her eyes and lifted her face upward. It was less that she was obediently complying,

and more that she was anticipating something special to happen. Tension lingered in the air.

Mahiru, undoubtedly expecting something, looked so incredibly adorable that Amane inadvertently covered his mouth with his hand in an effort to hide his grin. Even though she still couldn't see him, he felt the urge to hide it nonetheless. The sight of his girlfriend waiting for him expectantly was just too endearing to bear.

"…Sorry, this time I wasn't going in for a kiss." Not wanting to shatter her expectations in their entirety, he whispered this softly in her ear.

Mahiru's caramel-colored eyes flew open, focusing only on Amane. Then, her face turned a striking shade of red as she pouted cutely, murmuring "*You. Big. Dum. My*," in a rhythm that matched the light thumps she also subjected to his chest.

Being treated like some kind of drum, Amane almost started grinning again at just how cute she was acting. However, he knew that if he showed it on his face, Mahiru's playful hits might become stronger, so he bit the inside of his cheek to hold back his smile.

"Ow, ow, ow. I'm sorry… I still have something else I want to show you, so I needed you to close your eyes again."

"…You should have said that sooner."

"Again, I am sorry."

Now pouting even more than before, Mahiru turned away and closed her eyes again. Taking the opportunity, Amane leaned in and lightly pressed his lips against the slightly flushed, tasty peach-like cheek offered in front of him.

Mahiru seemed to recognize the touch and warmth of his body, having experienced it several times before. She opened her eyes and immediately froze in place. Amane laughed softly and said, "Keep your eyes closed, okay?" Her slender throat trembled, and a soft growl of frustration escaped her lips.

"That was another surprise." Satisfied with the impromptu surprise he had added, Amane headed to the kitchen, feeling pleased with himself.

Amane preparing their entire dinner and insisting on doing all the cleanup himself, despite Mahiru wanting to help, was all part of his plan to

keep her away from the refrigerator. He retrieved the culmination of his weeks of preparation from the fridge, carefully taking the box out and holding the plate carefully with both hands.

Amane carefully carried the plate to the table, taking his time. He saw Mahiru's face turn towards him, sensing through the sound and his presence that he had returned.

Silently, he smiled to himself.

I can't wait to see her reaction when she opens her eyes.

"Keep them closed a bit longer for me, okay?"

As Amane wasn't quite ready yet, he had whispered that to her while carefully pressing birthday candles that he had hidden into the white cream base. The candles he used were thinner and more colorful than the typical candles.

One… Two… As he silently inserted the candles one by one, he began to feel that seventeen of them just might have been a bit too many. The cake was now dominated by the pastel colors of the candles. Reflecting on his miscalculation, Amane lit the candles with a lighter, deciding to simply roll with it despite the cake becoming a lot more colorful than he had imagined.

The downside was that lighting this many candles took a bit of time, but once Amane had successfully lit all of them, he dimmed the room's lights using the remote control. While the surroundings grew dim, it still wasn't completely dark. The soft glow from the candles, one for each year of Mahiru's age, cast a gentle veil over the decorated room, illuminating it.

"You can open your eyes now, Mahiru," he whispered gently to her, who had followed his instructions until the very end. Mahiru slowly and cautiously lifted her eyelids, and—

"…Ah," A trembling whisper—one of either lament or astonishment—accidentally escaped her lips.

The soft light brightened Mahiru's face, revealing an almost dazed expression that threw her usual composure out of the window. Her eyes reflected clearly the flickering flames of the candles before her.

Amane cleared his throat once before slowly parting his lips to speak. While truthfully, this made him feel a bit embarrassed, his desire to convey and share his feelings with Mahiru was much stronger. Although he didn't

consider himself skilled at it, he sang the short happy birthday song that his parents used to sing to him as a child just for her, putting his heart and soul into every word.

"Happy seventeenth birthday, Mahiru."

Deliberately saving the words he had wanted to say since they met earlier today, Amane finally expressed his joy and celebration for the birth of his beloved girlfriend. When he looked at Mahiru, she was completely frozen, taken aback.

Amane understood that she was likely overwhelmed by the unexpected shock and gave her a small smile as she stood there, frozen, undoubtedly trying to process and make sense of what had just happened.

"I did wonder if this might be a bit too childish," Amane said softly. He had decorated the room lavishly, prepared a special birthday seat, brought out a whole cake with plenty of candles, and even sang the happy birthday song. Despite being a high schooler, the celebration was the spitting image of a child's party. But that was exactly what Amane was going for, and he had prepared everything just for this moment.

"At the end of the day, we're still kids too, so I thought a party like this would be nice. I have fond and happy memories of my birthday being celebrated just like this when I was younger. The memories of what they did for me as a child have always stayed with me, even now."

Even though his memories of his childhood were a bit vague, he still remembered those events clearly to this day.

His parents had decorated the room exactly to his tastes, placed his favorite stuffed animals and toys at the table, put candles on his favorite cake, and given him the privilege of blowing them out. They had showered him with countless *"happy birthdays"* and an abundance of love. Those fond childhood memories remained deeply embedded in his heart, giving him the pride of being loved. It was this assurance that had helped him overcome even the most difficult of hardships.

"It may be presumptuous of me, but I wanted to share my happiness with you. I think a party like this is something we all dreamed of as kids," Amane added.

To a certain extent, birthday parties were something that most children

had either experienced or longed for. While it wasn't good to base everything on his own experiences, there was no denying that for Amane as a child, no day was more exhilarating than his birthday.

"I wondered if, just maybe, you had once dreamed of something like this," Amane continued. While he felt a bit guilty for making such assumptions on his own, seeing Mahiru's reaction assured him that he hadn't been wrong. "That's why I wanted you to experience it too. I know it might be selfish of me, but even so…"

Seventeen candles on a cake with a fifteen centimeter diameter might have been overkill, but after considering the birthdays Mahiru hadn't—or *couldn't*—celebrate before, it didn't seem overkill at all. As the flames of the candles gently swayed in the warm air, a silent shimmer appeared in Mahiru's eyes and began to fall like a sparkling tear.

Just a moment later, Mahiru's body immediately melted like jelly. Amane panicked—her face crumpled, and countless clear droplets of tears began to fall.

"D-Did you not like it?" Amane asked, alarmed.

"No, it's not that—it's just, um, I'm so, so happy…and my heart is overflowing… Do I really deserve something so…wonderful?" Through her sobs, Mahiru, now having experienced something she had never experienced before in its entirety, tried her best to weave her overwhelming feelings into words.

Amane crouched down beside Mahiru as she desperately tried to articulate her emotions, showing her true, unvarnished appearance. Feeling tears well up in his own eyes, he gently enveloped her trembling hand with his.

"I'm glad you liked it. I put a lot of thought into it, asking myself, 'What can I do here to make Mahiru happy?' I thought a lot about different ideas for your birthday and consulted many people. In the end, it was all worthwhile," Amane said softly.

This was different from the first time he had celebrated Mahiru's birthday. This time, when Itsuki and Chitose lended a hand, they knew that it was all for Mahiru. His parents also offered their advice for Mahiru's sake, and friends like Yuuta and Ayaka, as well as seniors and even the owner at

his part-time job, all contributed to make the day possible in their own ways.

"It wasn't just me—a lot of people came together to help out today. That just goes to show that there are many people wanting to celebrate your birthday and are willing to lend me a hand."

"…Yes."

"Now, blow the candles out before they melt. That's your special privilege as the birthday girl."

Happy Birthday!

After wiping Mahiru's tears with a handkerchief, Amane gave her a playful smile. Her tear-streaked cheeks relaxed slightly, as if she was amused. Not wanting to cry any longer, her eyes—though still wet—regained their bright sparkle as she broke out into a shy yet joyful smile.

Mahiru got down from the sofa and knelt in front of the table. As the candles' flames glowed softly yet mightily amidst the darkness, she blew them out gently. The flames merely flickered, trying to resist her gentle breath, and after a few attempts, Mahiru turned back to Amane with a troubled look. That initial confusion of hers was more endearing to Amane than anything else.

Seeing Mahiru struggle, unsure of how to proceed, Amane gently encouraged her with pats on the back. "Since there's seventeen candles, you'll have to blow a bit harder." He continued to watch over her, wanting her to blow out all the candles herself. After all, blowing out the birthday cake candles was a ritual meant only for the star of the show.

Backed by Amane's encouragement, Mahiru took a deep breath and blew on the candles as if to snuff out each and every one of her worries. As each candle went out, the room grew dimmer and dimmer, but Mahiru continued to extinguish the flames one by one. The moment she blew out the last candle, Amane turned the living room lights back on.

The cake could now be seen in all its glory.

Amane had gone for a simple shortcake. It was decorated mainly with strawberries and whipped cream to honor the first shortcake Amane had given to Mahiru last year. However, at the same time, Amane couldn't say that it was an exact reproduction.

The decorations was one thing, but sat in the center of the cake was a chocolate plaque with the words *"Happy Birthday"* written on it clumsily by Amane. That, paired with the candles nestled between the chocolate and the strawberries, made it a completely different cake than the one he had bought all that time ago. Even so, he had specifically chosen this cake to add last year's memories on top of the brand new ones they were creating

today.

"Now that the lights are on, the cake looks even more rough around the edges, huh…" Amane trailed off before assuring, "W-Well, even so, the taste should be just fine! The shop owner watched me make it, so I can guarantee that much! I practiced it a lot!"

"Huh? Wh–When did you do that? Where…?"

"At work. I asked the owner to teach me the ropes while I helped her test a new recipe." As he served her taste-tester, Amane had earnestly asked Fumika for help, to which she agreed on the spot. She agreed so quickly, in fact, that it left Amane utterly dumbfounded—and he was the one asking. "That's how I managed to do it without coming home too late. Otherwise, you would have caught on. I'm really grateful to the owner."

Despite her busy schedule, Fumika took the time out of her day to personally teach Amane. She had said, "It lightens the load on everyone else if more people can make cakes," but Amane knew that she was just trying to put him at ease, which made him feel a bit guilty.

Under Fumika's kind guidance, Amane managed to learn a foolproof recipe for baking a sponge cake. Naturally, when making a cake, being able to reproduce the recipe was essential. Fumika gave him thorough instructions of the steps and precautions so that he would be able to bake it himself using the equipment he had at home. Thanks to this, Amane had gotten the hang of baking sponge cakes. Though his frosting skills still left much to be desired, Fumika assured him that it wasn't something he could master so easily. He had at least learned how to make a cake presentable before moving on to tackle the real thing.

I'm glad that Mahiru is happy with it nonetheless.

Feeling relieved, Amane looked at the cake he had prepared for her. "Well, it comes with a price."

"A–A price…? You did all this for me and—"

"'Let me know if your darling girlfriend likes it,' she said… So, what do you think?"

From the very beginning, Fumika didn't want to ask for anything in return. But to fulfill her request and satiate his own curiosity, Amane gently yet intently stared at Mahiru. Looking as if she were about to cry again, she

nodded.

"I'm so happy, I can't even find the right words. Truly, thank you very much," Mahiru said, giving him a smile of pure joy despite being on the verge of tears.

Relieved, Amane thanked Fumika in his mind and went to get the plates and cake knife. However, Mahiru then looked up at him with a worried look.

"…Is it really okay for me to experience such happiness?"

"*Nnnope*."

Amane accidentally replied reflexively, and Mahiru froze in place. Quickly realizing that saying too few words could be misunderstood, Amane hurriedly continued.

"Oh— Just to clarify, by 'nope', I mean that the happiness you are feeling right now is nowhere near enough. I'll make you even happier than this, so you can't be satisfied just yet."

"…Okay." Mahiru nodded slightly, a faint blush tinging her cheeks.

Having managed to clear up the misunderstanding, Amane was relieved yet again. He got everything needed to eat the cake and then sat down on the floor next to Mahiru.

"Let's cut the cake now, shall we? Just please excuse how uneven all the candles are."

Amane had tried to place the candles in a way that would look pretty, but the chocolate plaque and strawberries blocked some of the spots he was going for, so it didn't turn out exactly as planned. Despite his efforts, some areas had more candles clustered together than others, showing that he still had room for improvement. He made a mental note to avoid such issues next time, but for now, Amane pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind and focused on the task at hand, contemplating how to cut the cake.

After mulling it over for a moment, Amane concluded, "In fact, we should probably remove the candles for now," and began to pull them out. Noticing the forlorn expression on Mahiru's face, he carefully placed the candles on a separate plate to reassure her.

As it was fifteen centimeters across, he decided to cut the cake into four pieces, making it both easy to cut and easy to eat. He handed the plate with

the main slice, which had the chocolate plaque on it, to Mahiru. “Here you go.”

Mahiru accepted the plate with great care. Her cheeks softened and her eyes sparkled as if she were gazing upon the figure of a treasured possession. Although Amane thought she was exaggerating a bit, it was also proof of how much joy Mahiru felt. Feeling a bit ticklish inside, he handed her a fork.

“Enjoy.”

“Th-Thank you for the meal.”

Mahiru seemed a bit hesitant, for she couldn’t eat the slice without disturbing the carefully balanced chocolate on top.

Mahiru hesitated for quite some time, at a loss for what to do. Then, with an apologetic look, she gently removed the chocolate from its white stage. She took her time slowly cutting the cake into bite-sized pieces, but once she started eating them, it was all gone in an instant.

With a quiet *“nom”*, the beautiful contrast of white and red disappeared into her petite lips. Her wide caramel-colored eyes blinked open, then slowly softened and narrowed with delight.

Seeing the previously hesitant expression on her face now replaced with a gentle and pleased look, Amane was certain that his efforts over the past two weeks had paid off beautifully.

“…How is it?” Amane finally asked.

“It’s delicious.”

After chewing thoroughly and swallowing, Mahiru nodded to Amane with a shy smile. Seeing this, Amane finally allowed himself to relax. He released the heavy breath he had been holding and took in a fresh one, now feeling much lighter.

“Thank goodness. You made a cake for my birthday, so I wanted to return the favor,” Amane said.

As someone who wanted to return happiness in kind, Amane wanted Mahiru to experience the same joy she had given him on his special day. Since he was a complete novice and had not much time to prepare, he realized he needed to give it his best effort. Rather than fumbling about on his own, he decided to seek guidance from an expert. This approach was so

successful that Amane realized it was indeed wise to rely on others when truly in a moment of need.

"But with my skills, there's no way I could make something on your level, Mahiru. Relying on others really is the way to go."

"…The kind owner taught you, right?"

"Yeah, I went to her for help. When I said, 'I want to make a birthday cake for my girlfriend,' she just beamed at me. That's very much a her thing to do. Anyway, I'm really grateful to her," Amane said.

Fumika had explained, *"The simpler the dish, the more the flavor of the ingredients and skill of the maker affect the final taste."* Since Amane was a complete amateur when it came to baking—despite now being a fairly good cook—she made sure to teach him from the ground up.

Fumika had him taste various cakes to demonstrate how different sponge textures could be achieved by altering the way eggs were beaten. She also showed him how the fat content of the cream changed the whipping time and technique, letting him work with different ingredients to understand their properties. Additionally, she even told him where to buy the best ingredients for baking, directing him to a specialty confectionery shop. Fumika provided him with a wide range of support to help him improve.

After receiving so much help on top of being hired by her as a part-timer, Amane felt incredibly indebted to her. He couldn't help but hold her in high regard.

"I would also like to thank her in person for her help with your birthday, but…you don't want me to go, right?" Mahiru said hesitantly.

"I-It's not that I don't want you to," Amane quickly replied. "I would just prefer if you came after I've gotten better at the job… You know, it'd be embarrassing if I wasn't doing a proper job and stuff."

Amane had now been working for over a month, so he was confident that he'd gotten used to the job itself. But at the same time, he wasn't confident that his skills were polished enough to show to Mahiru.

He believed that most people felt a bit uneasy about being watched by their friends or significant other while they're working, and showing Mahiru how he performed at customer service would only worsen that

feeling for Amane. If he were to show Mahiru, he wanted her to see him handling everything with confidence. He felt sorry for making Mahiru wait, but this wasn't something Amane could compromise on.

Amane wanted to show her his best self whenever possible, even though Mahiru had already seen plenty of his weaknesses and awkward moments. To him, this was at the top of his priorities.

"But to me, you're cute even when you're flustered, Amane-kun."

"Well, that's no good… I want you to think I look cool."

"I understand. In that case, I will be waiting."

Despite being willing to forgive Amane for making her wait, Mahiru smiled with glee. Amane bowed in his mind, thanking her for her generosity as he brought a piece of cake to his mouth.

Thanks to Fumika's guidance, the cake itself came together beautifully. The sponge, brushed with syrup, was moist without being too heavy and had a fine, delicate texture that melted softly in the mouth alongside the strawberries sandwiched within. The cream had been measured such that it wouldn't be too sweet, allowing the strawberries' tartness and sweetness to really shine through. While Mahiru appreciated intricate and stylish desserts, she ultimately gravitated toward classic flavors like this one. Amane thought he had successfully recreated a taste that suited Mahiru's preferences.

Amane glanced at Mahiru, seeing her savor the cake with a gentle, soothed expression, as if she were treasuring each bite. She seemed even more content than she usually did when enjoying dessert, her eyebrows relaxed in genuine satisfaction.

"It truly is delicious," Mahiru said softly.

"…I'm glad."

If Mahiru liked it, then that was the greatest win for Amane.

Making cakes for Mahiru isn't a bad idea every now and then, he then thought, slowly enjoying the sweet yet not-too-sweet cake that was topped with Mahiru's smile.

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When Mahiru finished eating, Amane timed his move and headed to the bedroom where he had a gift prepared. He knew that if he left it conspicuously wrapped in the brightly lit living room, it would be far too easy to guess what was inside. However, Mahiru seemed to miss him while he left the room, following him with her eyes as he left. Amane returned with the gift in his hand, and she blinked several times in surprise.

Amane felt delighted as he realized he'd seen many of Mahiru's expressions just like that one today. He knelt down at Mahiru's feet while she sat on the sofa in bewilderment, he gently placed the gift on her hands, which rested atop her neatly aligned thighs.

"Here's your birthday present. Experiences and memories are important, but I also wanted to give you something tangible that you can hold onto."

The bouquet was nothing more than the opening act, with the cake and this gift following right after, and then one final item serving as the main event.

Though he called it a present, it wasn't anything particularly extravagant. As a high school student, his options were limited to what he could afford and what he thought Mahiru would like. However, Amane believed that the thought and reasoning behind his choice were what mattered most. After much deliberation, he had decided to give Mahiru this gift in his own way.

"To be honest, Mahiru, you always buy things that you need, and you wouldn't be too happy if I gave you something that was just expensive. You'd probably feel guilty about it. So, I really struggled to pick something."

He had talked with Chitose before, and they both agreed that Mahiru wasn't a materialistic person. She was someone who bought what she needed without hesitation, making her quite a challenging person to buy for.

Amane knew that Mahiru would be happy with anything he gave her, but that only made it harder for him to choose. In the end, he selected a present based on his own observations and imagination of Mahiru.

When he gently whispered, "Go ahead and open it," Mahiru seemed to snap out of her stiffened state. The way she glanced at him as if asking for

permission amused Amane, and he couldn't help but laugh. Mahiru pouted a little at his reaction, but with a mix of nervousness and anticipation, she began to carefully untie the ribbon wrapped around the box. Amane noticed her fingers trembling slightly, but decided it was best not to mention it.

Mahiru untied the glossy red ribbon, something many people associated with presents. She then meticulously removed the wrapping paper, finally revealing the box that contained the gift itself.

When Mahiru looked at him for his stamp of approval again, Amane laughed and encouraged her, "Go ahead, you can open it." Holding her breath, she gently lifted the lid of the box. Inside, nestled in cushioning material, was yet another box, one that fit snugly in both of Mahiru's palms. Well, calling it just a "box" was not entirely accurate. It wasn't a matryoshka-like situation where the gift was merely a series of plain boxes. Amane would never give such a bland gift.

What Mahiru held in her hands now was a wooden, antique-style jewelry box. Its tasteful color and the elegant design featuring her favorite flowers made it a refined and beautiful item, more sophisticated and graceful than simply cute.

"Um, I got you a jewelry box that I thought you might like," Amane said.

Normally, giving jewelry or cosmetics would be a safe choice for a girlfriend's birthday present, but after considering various opinions, Amane decided on this.

Partly due to her personality, Mahiru was known for taking great care of her possessions, especially items given to her by others, which she tended to preserve meticulously. Amane had heard that she carefully maintained and stored each thing he had given her to prevent any deterioration, and he deeply respected her for that. Therefore, he wanted to give her a special place to keep those cherished items—something that would hold and protect her treasured memories.

"Mahiru, I know that you always take such great care of everything I give you. That's why I thought it might be nice for you to have a special place to store them all. Although I do realize you probably already have something similar already, so it's not like I'm forcing you to use it or anything!"

Amane emphasized that while he had given it to her, she was under no

obligation to use it, saying that it was an important distinction. After that, he cleared his throat.

"I thought it would be nice to have a place where you could store the things I'll be giving you in the future," he added, albeit a bit awkwardly. He found it embarrassing to say it so directly, which made his words hard to form. But slowly, Amane voiced the wish he held in his heart. "I was just thinking that it would be nice if that box eventually became full with only the things I've given you… Sorry. That's just my own selfish wish."

"…It's not selfish," Mahiru replied softly.

Amane was about to flash a self-deprecating smile, thinking it was selfish of him to pack his own wishes into the gift he chose. However, Mahiru, with her head bowed, shook her head. Her voice trembled slightly, and a large teardrop akin to a gemstone fell from her eye, splashing on the back of her hand as it rested on the box.

He didn't need to be told. Amane already knew that they were not tears born from sadness.

"…Just how many times do you want to make me cry today, Amane-kun?"

"If it's out of happiness, then as many times as it takes."

"…Oh, you," she whispered, the slightly sulky, yet affectionate tone in her voice a testament to the deep trust she had in Amane.

When Mahiru finally lifted her head, she gave Amane the sweetest, most dazzling smile, one so satisfied that it seemed to soothe the redness around her eyes from crying.

"When I get home, I'll have to store everything in here. My bracelet, my hairpins. All my treasures," Mahiru giggled. "Everytime I open it, I'll be filled with happiness."

Mahiru gently lifted the lid as if handling something fragile. Inside was a simple, spacious interior with no partitions for compartments, and three layers of storage. It wasn't particularly large, but it seemed just right for holding accessories or thin items. Mahiru couldn't hide the excitement in her voice as she admired the box.

"I want to keep filling your box with more and more treasures," Amane said.

“There appears to be plenty of space not just for accessories, so I’ll have to store other important items here too,” replied Mahiru.

“Like what?”

“Hehe, mementos of the memories I’ve experienced with you, Amane-kun. They’re really just little things, so I shall keep them a secret.”

Amane clearly remembered the gifts he had given her, but from the way Mahiru spoke, it seemed that she also cherished other items that weren’t exactly meant as presents.

He felt slightly guilty as he realized he couldn’t quite recall what those items might be. However, Mahiru, noticing his unease, simply smiled at him, showing that she wasn’t bothered by it at all.

“You’re keeping them a secret, huh?”

“Yes… They’re items that you probably gave to me without much thought, or things that we came by when we were out together. So it’s natural that you won’t remember them all. Please look forward to it when the time comes. Once the box is full, I’ll show you everything stashed inside. That way, we can look back and reminisce together.”

“Sure.”

Surely, they would continue to create many more memories together. No, they *will* create them—Amane was certain that they would.

I hope that, one day, this box will be full to the brim with our happiness, Amane wished, silently conveying this hope to Mahiru with his eyes. She smiled tenderly, sharing the same sentiment. Their looks softened, both of them looking forward to the future they would build together.

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Seeing Mahiru quietly close her eyes, basking in the afterglow of her birthday celebration, Amane couldn’t help but feel a bit proud, thinking that things had gone well so far. However, with the final piece of the plan still left, Amane was unsure of how Mahiru would react. He pressed his lips together, reminding himself not to let his guard down just yet.

A quick glance at the wall revealed the hands of the wall clock, subtly hidden by the decorations, steadily approaching the promised time.

…It's nearly time.

The time had come for the final—and likely the *biggest*—surprise of Mahiru's birthday.

Mahiru, believing that all the celebrations for today were over and all that was left was to bask in the sweet warmth of happiness, was sitting on the sofa, gently pressing the soft paw pads of the cat plushie. She seemed completely at ease.

Amane felt genuinely sorry for disrupting her when she was so relaxed, but they had already reached the point of no return, leaving him no choice but to steel himself for what was to come.

"…Umm, Mahiru, well, the thing is…"

"Yes?"

Mahiru looked up at Amane without a sliver of wariness. Her expression was even softer and more relaxed than usual, colored with a joyful glow. Her dreamy gaze, brimming with affection for him, was so unbearably cute that Amane felt as if it could cause five canker sores to sprout on the inside of his cheek from the sheer sweetness of the sight alone.

Amane bit the inside of his cheek to suppress the overwhelming urge to shower her with affection, then forced himself to maintain a calm exterior as he continued.

"Actually, there's one more surprise in store for you."

"You've already done enough, but there's still more? Haven't you prepared a few too many things?"

"If anything, it's still not enough to make up for all the birthdays you should've had until now. It wouldn't hurt to be a little more greedy and ask for more, you know?"

"N-No, that's not… I mean, um, I might get overwhelmed, like, it might be too much for me to take all at once."

"Well, if that happens, I'm sorry."

"Huh?"

In fact, Amane had prepared the final surprise fully aware that it might overwhelm her.

Mahiru gazed at Amane with a puzzled expression, clearly not understanding what he meant. Daring not to explain further, Amane quietly

stood up, ready to open the curtains for the final and greatest gift he could give—the surprise of all surprises.

"Everything's ready, so just sit tight while I finish the final touches."

Leaving a confused Mahiru behind, Amane returned to his room to bring back the laptop he had readied in advance. The sudden appearance of what, to her, seemed like an unrelated laptop only intensified Mahiru's curious gaze, but Amane remained steadfast and chose not to elaborate. He simply placed the laptop on the low table, keeping up an air of mystery and anticipation.

The screen he opened displayed the waiting room of a video conferencing app, ready for a call.

"Well, I might be…meddling far too much with this, but…"

The biggest surprise of the day, decided entirely by Amane's own judgment and perhaps a bit of self-righteousness, was something that he couldn't achieve on his own. While his heart swelled with anticipation, hoping Mahiru would be happy, a nagging fear lingered—anxiety that his presumptuous act might be unwelcome. For Amane, it was almost like taking a risky gamble.

Of course, he knew that Mahiru would have been more than happy without this final surprise—she had already cried tears of joy earlier. So perhaps, this wasn't something he should have done. But now that the gears were set in motion, there was no turning back.

He needed to steel himself and see it through.

"You might think this was an unwelcome favor or that I'm overstepping my bounds, but I'm not the only person who wants to congratulate you. There is someone else who has cared for and always thought about you."

Today, many people celebrated the day that marked Mahiru's birth, and congratulated her. Her closest and most cherished friends had all gathered to help and celebrate her birthday. Surely, she must have been overjoyed, with nothing to complain about. Yet, Amane couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing. It wasn't enough for her to be celebrated by her current friends and those who had taken on a parental role in her life. He wondered if there wasn't someone from her past, someone Mahiru once admired and loved deeply, who had been left out. Someone who would want

to celebrate her birth from the bottom of their heart.

After sending a message in the chat to confirm that everything was ready, Amane took slow, deep breaths to calm his racing heartbeat. Then, he clicked the button with the phone icon.

The screen shifted from a blank, dark void to a display glowing with vibrant hues.

"Ojou-sama."

A gentle voice emanated softly from the computer's speakers.

The voice, neither loud nor quiet, carried a soft and calm tone. It wasn't a voice that Amane recognized, but for Mahiru, it was likely a different story.

A surprised "*Huh?*" escaped Mahiru's lips, her voice slightly trembling.

In an instant, Mahiru sprung. She leapt off the sofa, landing on the floor with a sense of urgency. She leaned in close to the laptop on the low table, staring intently at the screen. Her face, usually so composed, was now filled with shock and disbelief.

Mahiru's eyes jumped wide open. Unable to believe what she was seeing, her slightly agape mouth gave her an almost dazed appearance. It was clear that she was completely bewildered, perhaps even flummoxed. The woman on the screen, appearing to be about a decade older than Amane's own parents, seemed to notice Mahiru's disbelief. With an elegant smile that carried a hint of surprise and amusement, the woman looked directly at Mahiru.

"I've since stepped down from my duties, so perhaps this way of addressing you is no longer appropriate. Let's see…"

Mahiru remained frozen, her body tense as she stared at the screen, while the woman—Koyuki—met her gaze through the screen and smiled gently.

"…*Mahiru-san*, long time no see."

Gracefully placing one hand over her chest, Koyuki called Mahiru's name with a refined smile. Unfazed by Mahiru's apparent state of shock, Koyuki continued speaking.

"I'm sorry for calling your name so suddenly, but since I'm no longer employed, would you allow me to call you by your given name?"

"Wh-Why— How… I-Is this real?"

“Was our little surprise a success?” Koyuki teased, giggling a little.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that it was a resounding success—so much so that Amane worried it might have shocked Mahiru to the point where her heart might stop. The surprise had caught her completely off guard.

Even from a short distance away, Amane could see how Mahiru was further thrown into confusion by the playful yet refined tone of Koyuki’s voice. It wasn’t crude but carried an air of mature elegance, making the situation just that more overwhelming for Mahiru.

“H-Huh? What? H-How are we…”

“Ah, you must be confused as to how I’m here on this video call. As for how, I think the gentleman sitting next to you would be better suited to answer.”

Realizing that the spotlight had now been turned on him, Amane couldn’t help but chuckle softly. As Mahiru quickly turned to face him, he knew he had no choice but to explain. Gently guiding her to sit back down on the sofa, he looked up at her, bracing himself to provide the explanation she was clearly waiting for.

“Uh…firstly, let me apologize. I’m sorry.”

“Huh?”

“I did something bad.”

“B-Bad…?”

“Aren’t you curious how I managed to get in contact?”

Koyuki was Mahiru’s housekeeper and tutor, responsible for looking after her before Mahiru met Amane. Amane had no direct connection with Koyuki and had never spoken to her or even heard her voice before. Naturally, Mahiru would quickly realize that there was no way Amane could have known her contact information on his own.

As soon as Mahiru let out a small “Ah,” instantly realizing what he meant, a feeling of guilt rose in Amane’s mind. He took a deep breath, organizing the explanation he had prepared in his mind, and then slowly began to speak, ready to explain how everything had come to pass.

“Remember when, um, we talked about how I wanted to greet Koyu—Kujigawa-san?”

"Y-Yes?"

"When you showed me her picture, I kind of…caught a glimpse of a note. And I, uh, actually memorized the address and number on it."

That was how Amane came across Koyuki's personal information.

It turned out that, although they usually communicated through letters, Koyuki had left several methods of contact available. On a note that had been stored with other important documents, her email address, mailing address, and phone number were all listed. When Amane caught a glimpse of that note, the email address stood out—it was distinctive and easy to remember. Even though he hadn't stared at it intently, the address stuck in his mind almost instantly.

To be honest, Amane spent several days questioning whether it was really okay to send that email, repeatedly asking himself if he was crossing a line—not just breaching etiquette, but morality itself. The knot in his stomach after hitting *SEND* was something he could vividly recall even now.

Amane had always intended to introduce himself properly someday, but he knew that doing so in this manner, without permission, wasn't the right way to go about it.

He was fully aware that involving Koyuki in this was driven by his own selfish desires. Yet, despite knowing this, Amane couldn't help but feel that he needed her help, no matter what.

"Mahiru, Kujikawa-san. I really, truly apologize for obtaining and then using your personal information without permission. I deeply regret my actions."

Knowing that his image was being broadcast on the other end, Amane moved in front of the camera and bowed deeply, his head lowered in sincere apology. Koyuki's expression turned to a wry smile, as if to say, ***"It can't be helped."*** When he had first contacted her, he had also apologized profusely, and even now, he felt it wasn't enough, so he kept his head bowed. After a moment, he heard Koyuki's slightly exasperated voice reach the back of his head.

"Dear me, please raise your head. At first, I had suspected it was a scam email, and I even consulted my son and his wife about it."

"I am truly sorry."

“I’ll let you off this time out of consideration of your desperation. Your determination to do whatever it took for her, along with the guilt you felt, was plain to see. But please, be more careful next time, okay?”

“Yes. It won’t happen again.” Amane had no intention of ever doing something so blatantly disrespectful and overstepping boundaries like this again.

From Koyuki’s perspective, Amane was essentially a complete stranger, practically no different from a suspicious individual. The fact that she not only listened to him but also agreed to help filled him with overwhelming gratitude and, at the same time, guilt.

“Could you also forgive him on my behalf, Mahiru-san? He explained everything to me so earnestly, bowing his head the entire time. He knew that it was a rude and perhaps presumptuous request, yet he still asked if I could help him.”

“I–I’m not angry at all! Amane-kun always tries so hard for my sake, and I know he did this for me too. I just feel so, so happy, grateful, yet also guilty.”

“If you’re happy, then there’s nothing more I can ask for as your boyfriend.”

“He was incredibly passionate when he spoke to me, you know? He told me he wanted you to have the happiest birthday of your life, and that my involvement played a crucial part in making that happen. When he asked me so sincerely, how could I refuse to help? Besides, if I can be a part of your happiness, Mahiru-san, what better honor is there?”

As Koyuki’s soft-spoken words reached her, another tear slipped from Mahiru’s eyes, coursing quietly down her lightly blushing cheeks. Amane instinctively understood the nature of the emotions that had overflowed and manifested as tears. Aware that he’d been the one softening Mahiru’s heart throughout the day, he handed her the handkerchief he had kept nearby. Mahiru accepted it with a small, grateful smile.

“Once again, long time no see, Mahiru-san.”

After waiting for Mahiru’s overflowing emotions to be wiped away with the handkerchief, Koyuki tenderly greeted her one more time.

Watching their interaction, Amane thought it might be best to leave them to their long-awaited reunion in private. However, just as he began to step away, Mahiru's fingertips gently grasped his sleeve, a small gesture of resistance that naturally kept him rooted in place. Even though Mahiru might be okay with it, Amane worried that his presence might interfere with their reunion. But when he glanced at Koyuki, she smiled warmly and, with a look, encouraged him to stay.

It seemed that Koyuki didn't view him as an intruder on their reunion after all.

Mahiru patted the space next to her on the sofa, gently urging Amane to come sit beside her.

When Amane looked at the laptop screen, Koyuki's ever-cheerful yet inscrutable smile greeted him. Though he hesitated for a moment, he trusted that he wasn't unwelcome and quietly took a seat next to Mahiru.

"We have exchanged letters on a few occasions, but I never— …I wonder if it's appropriate of me to tally our meetings, but I never had the opportunity to see how much you've grown…until this moment. I am truly grateful for this opportunity."

"*It*—It has been a while, Koyuki-san…"

"My, please show me your smile instead of those tears. After all, you've given me the precious opportunity to see your face."

"Okay."

Mahiru, finally catching the large tears that kept spilling from her eyes with the handkerchief, managed to show a bright smile. Seeing this, Koyuki's expression softened into a relieved smile.

"But, now that I think about it, the fact that you can cry so openly now is a cause for celebration. It shows that you have gained the strength to show yourself to others in times of vulnerability."

As a child, Mahiru had been strong but also fragile, never willing to reveal her weaknesses, not even to Koyuki. She rarely showed her tears, holding everything inside and unable to rely on anyone, no matter how much she was hurting. She had no choice but to bear it all by herself. But now, Mahiru had shed that rigid shell. She had become softer, more open, yet at the same time, she had grown stronger and more resilient.

“You have grown up beautifully, Mahiru-san.”

“…Thank you.”

“You look so much brighter compared to the last time I saw you. There is a different light in your eyes. You must have been blessed with a wonderful environment. I am truly glad.”

“Yes…”

Koyuki’s voice, one of deep relief, was unmistakably from someone who genuinely cared for Mahiru.

Her gentle smile carried both concern and relief, revealing just how much she had worried for Mahiru at the time.

Although Mahiru had finally stopped crying, she had adopted an exceptionally good posture, her back straight and body slightly tense, as if she were trying to shrink herself. Seeing this, Koyuki brought a hand to her mouth and smiled gracefully, amused by Mahiru’s reaction.

Giggling, Koyuki said, **“There’s no need to be so formal—I’m no longer one of your employees. I’m simply an ordinary old lady now.”**

“I–It’s just…been so long, and, um, I’m a bit nervous!” Mahiru stammered.

“Oh my. Hehe, I suppose the feeling is mutual then, as my happiness has made me act a bit too familiar as well.”

Seeing Mahiru easily get embarrassed from her reply, Koyuki’s smile grew slightly wider.

“Forgive me for asking something so ordinary, but have you been well? Although I have read through the letters you sent from time to time, I would like to hear it directly from you.”

“Yes, I’ve been well. Quite…”

“How stiff. There’s no need to be so nervous—I’m not going to get angry or disappear on you.”

“Understood…”

“There you go, acting formal again.”

“Uuu…”

“This is something you’ll just have to get used to, Mahiru-san.”

Even after it was pointed out again, Mahiru’s tension didn’t seem to ease. She continued to sit with her back unusually straight, showing how

nervous she still was during this long-awaited reunion. However, the way she looked at the screen with eyes full of trust and affection meant that it was only a matter of time before she grew comfortable again.

“But truly, I’m glad to hear you’re well. Although, I could already tell just from the look on your face… You’ve met someone wonderful, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

Taken aback by the unexpected compliment, Amane sat up and readjusted the posture. The fact that Mahiru immediately affirmed it left him feeling embarrassed, causing his gaze to wander uncomfortably.

“If you say so, then I suppose I have nothing to worry about. Mind you, I already knew that he has been running around and working hard all for his sweet girlfriend, so I never doubted that he is a good person.”

Koyuki let out a soft, refined laugh, saying, **“Live long enough, and you can easily tell the good people from the bad.”** Though Amane felt a slight pang in his stomach, he maintained a polite smile, knowing full well that it was his own decision to contact her without permission that led to this situation. He kept his discomfort to himself.

Whether Koyuki noticed Amane’s mixed feelings or not, she maintained her elegant expression, showing no sign of change.

“…I truly can’t thank Amane-kun enough,” Mahiru said. “He did so much to prepare all of this for me, even going as far as to reconnect me with you, Koyuki-san.”

“Mahiru, you don’t need to worry about it. I only did it because I wanted to.”

In truth, Amane felt like he should be the one constantly apologizing, yet the fact that Mahiru was so happy made him feel both proud and relieved. While his methods were somewhat questionable, making it hard for him to celebrate as much as he’d usually like.

“Since it’s your birthday, I wanted you to be overflowing with happiness. Though to be honest, I wasn’t sure if it would work out—it was a fifty-fifty chance.”

Amane had taken on the risk of being seen as a nuisance, getting

scolded, or even disliked for his actions. So, it was a great relief that both Koyuki and Mahiru had forgiven him so easily.

"If a little running around on my part can make you happy, then it's worth every second I spent… I know you have been working hard everyday for me too, so I wanted to give something back. I wanted to see you smile more. Though I did end up making you cry just now."

As Amane spoke, tears continued to spill from the corners of Mahiru's eyes, each one a clear, beautiful droplet. He quickly grabbed the handkerchief again, gently dabbing at her tears. The sheer number of emotions she was expressing, something unimaginable from the Mahiru he used to know, made him feel as if the handkerchief itself might start crying soon. Yet, this overwhelming response reassured him that he had moved Mahiru's heart in a truly meaningful way.

"So, um, did it make you happy?"

"Yes, of course."

When Mahiru broke into a bright, carefree smile befitting her age, as if to say she couldn't just keep crying, both Amane and Koyuki felt a wave of relief wash over them.

"I'd love to hear more about the young man next to you, Mahiru-san. You two are dating, yes?"

"…We are. He is the first person I've ever truly loved. When I'm with him, I feel at ease, and my heart feels warm. He's the first person to love me for who I am, both my facade and my true self. He's someone who knows everything about me, yet still cherishes me. He sees a future with me and is ready to walk that path together."

Amane wasn't looking directly at Mahiru, but rather at the screen in front of him. Despite that, the situation of having someone Mahiru cherished like a parent nearby made him feel incredibly embarrassed. The way she sincerely, joyfully, and lovingly spoke about him, praising his character and expressing how much she wanted to be with him, was overwhelming. Yet, the joy of knowing Mahiru felt so deeply for him was even stronger. Without taking his eyes off the screen, his hand instinctively sought hers. At the same time, Mahiru seemed to be reaching out as well, and their fingertips met gently between them.

As their fingers naturally slid together from the tips to their palms, intertwining, Amane felt the warmth of Mahiru's hand, much warmer than usual, melt into his own.

"Really? I'm glad you seem to have found yourself a wonderful partner. Really, I'm so happy for you."

The warmth and trust radiating from Mahiru's hand brought a smile to Amane's face, which Koyuki was quick to catch onto. Her expression, while gentle, carried a hint of amused warmth, one even warmer than their intertwined hands. This realization brought a wave of embarrassment flooding back to Amane, who suddenly felt a little—no, *quite*—self-conscious as the boyfriend being introduced.

It was a relief that Koyuki, unlike a certain teasing mother, had no intention of making fun of him. She maintained her calm and gentle exterior, simply watching over them with a cozy, approving smile.

"Ever since she was young, Mahiru-san has been sharper than most, so I was worried that she might become disinterested in other people. But it seems as though my worries were unfounded."

The concern that arose from having watched Mahiru since she was young was something Amane could understand and agree with. He couldn't help but think that it was a miracle Mahiru had chosen someone like him—a thought that Mahiru would likely scold him for if she knew.

"By the way, have you grabbed him by the stomach?" Koyuki asked, remembering what she had told Mahiru all those years ago.

"…Have I grabbed him…?" Mahiru parroted, puzzled.

"Yeah, with an *iron grip*," Amane declared.

"Oh my."

Amane nodded emphatically, without a shadow of a doubt in his mind that he was right. He was met with Koyuki's knowing smile, as if she had expected nothing less. Having often heard that Mahiru's cooking skills were honed under Koyuki's guidance, Amane, who regularly enjoyed those delicious meals, felt he ought to bow in deep gratitude to the source of Mahiru's culinary prowess.

Just as Amane was about to bow his head in gratitude from a different angle, he noticed Mahiru waving her free hand in a flustered manner, as if trying to stop him.

"Ah! But it's not as if he leaves everything to me! Amane-kun cooks too! He always helps me in the kitchen, and he even prepared meals on his own!

It's more like we take turns or swap shifts… He really does his part in, um, living together with me!"

Mahiru didn't want Koyuki to mistakenly believe that Amane left everything to her and leeched off her effort. However, it couldn't be denied that Mahiru carried a significant part of the responsibility. So Amane added, "But truth is, Mahiru's cooking is the best, and I do genuinely prefer her meals," which caused Mahiru's eyes to well up with tears once again.

Although she didn't actually cry, Amane could feel a slight tremble and a stronger grip than usual coming from Mahiru's hand.

"I know, I know. You don't need to panic, Mahiru-san. I understand perfectly. He's your ideal partner, isn't he?"

"Yes!" Even with her eyes shimmering with emotion, Mahiru nodded firmly and continued without hesitation. "After all, you were the one who told me to choose someone who would truly make me happy, Koyuki-san."

"Yes, I certainly did."

"You were definitely right, Koyuki-san. Even when you were with me, but especially after you were gone, I interacted with so many different people. It was then that I came to realize…the person who would make me happy is someone who doesn't try to fit me into a mold, who doesn't judge me just by what they see on the surface, and who never disregards my feelings."

Because Mahiru had been surrounded by so many different people throughout her life, the bar for her relationships was likely whether or not the other party could respect her as an individual. It was a simple yet profoundly important criterion—something essential, yet often difficult to find in others.

"Amane-kun always puts my feelings first and makes an effort to understand me. He fell in love with who I am on the inside, and he accepted me despite my childhood experiences. He respects me, and that makes me incredibly happy… Although he can be a little too respectful, which makes him reserved instead."

"It's for your own good, Mahiru!"

"I—I know it is! …I understand very well that you're just being careful *because* you respect me so much."

Amane couldn't help but feel like Mahiru had just subtly called him a coward, though he knew this *"carefulness"* was something they had both agreed upon. Still, he wondered if there was some underlying dissatisfaction on her part that he hadn't caught onto.

As Amane stared at her, Mahiru hastily added, "I-It's not that I'm unhappy or anything! I just mean that maybe you don't always have to be so concerned about how I'm feeling—you could prioritize your own feelings a bit more." She seemed embarrassed and somewhat unsure of what she was saying, leaving Amane, as her boyfriend, with yet another thing to puzzle over.

But if I did that, you're *the one that's going to overheat.*

He had no intention of breaking the vow he made back then, but hearing Mahiru's words made him wonder…

As long as I don't break our promise, maybe we can do stuff I *wanna do?*

Amane seriously considered whether pampering Mahiru in the way she was suggesting was a good idea, given her limited tolerance for such things. He gazed at her with a serious look, but Mahiru, likely embarrassed by her own bold words, merely blushed and seemed oblivious to the thoughts running through his mind.

"I'm glad to see that you two are close. That said, I am curious about how you mentioned living together."

Though Koyuki wasn't scolding them, there was an undertone of disbelief in her voice that made Mahiru's cheeks twitch with embarrassment. She realized that discussing such matters in front of someone she admired like a parent might not have been the best idea.

"A-Ah! N-No, it's not like *that*! Amane-kun is actually my neighbor—I mean, we live in the same apartment building! There's absolutely nothing going on that would cause you to worry, Koyuki-san!" Mahiru hurried to explain things clearly.

"I swear, I haven't done anything that would hurt Mahiru in any way."

From Koyuki's perspective, it would be natural to worry that someone she considered her beloved daughter might be taken advantage of by an unfamiliar man. Realizing how careless their words might have sounded, both Mahiru and Amane lamented their poor phrasing. However, Koyuki,

after letting out a soft sigh that conveyed a mix of concern and mild exasperation, turned a gentle gaze toward Mahiru.

“I’m not in any place to criticize, but at least if you’re spending so much time together and still get along so well, that’s a good sign. The more time you spend together, the more you will see each other’s less desirable traits.”

“I-I don’t think there are any… Um, and even if there were, we could always talk it out and work on improving together.”

It’s often said that living together can reveal differences in habits, financial habits, hygiene, common sense, and ethics, which can be frustrating. However, despite spending so much time together, Amane had yet to encounter any major issues with Mahiru that bothered him. If he had to point out anything, it would be her tendency to hold back too much and her occasional bold actions spurred on by Chitose’s influence. The former was something Mahiru had been improving as she became more honest, and the latter was more of an issue with Chitose herself—something that might just warrant a serious talk with her.

This led Amane to consider whether Mahiru had any complaints about him. She hadn’t pointed out many issues lately, though when they had first started to interact, she had been quite frank about things she didn’t like. It was possible that he had already addressed most of the things she wanted him to change. However, Amane was still concerned that there might still be things she hadn’t mentioned, so he put on a serious face and told her, “If there’s anything you don’t like, don’t hesitate to tell me, okay? I don’t want to cause you any trouble. I want us both to be comfortable, and if I can change something, I will.”

In response, Mahiru quickly shook her head, clearly flustered by the suggestion. “If anything, you’re *too* considerate towards me! You’re an incredibly wonderful person to me, okay!?”

“You don’t have to flatter me.”

“…Then that is something I want you to work on. Please learn to accept compliments properly when I give them.”

Seeing Mahiru pout so clearly, her lips adorably pursed as she lightly patted Amane’s thigh, he knew he couldn’t let her sulk any further. With a

smile, he quickly responded, “Got it, thank you,” successfully preventing her cheeks from puffing out even more.

“Mahiru-san has completely opened her heart to you, hasn’t she?”

When Amane looked back at the screen after hearing those heartfelt words, he noticed that Koyuki, who had been quietly watching their interaction, was looking at the spot where their hands had been playfully interacting. It was clear that she had seen right through them.

Mahiru, naturally embarrassed, hunched her shoulders and blushed deeply, which left Amane struggling to suppress the rising tide of his own embarrassment, trying his best not to let it show on his face.

Koyuki let out a soft, amused chuckle. Still smiling, she gently turned her gaze towards Amane.

“And you, Fujimiya-san? What do you think about her?”

“What do I…?”

“Oh, ignore me. That makes it sound like an interview, doesn’t it? That’s not what I meant…” Koyuki faced Amane with a gentle yet discerning gaze. **“I want to know how you see Mahiru-san, how she appears from *your* perspective.”**

Rather than give a prompt answer, Amane decided to take his time, thinking carefully before responding.

—How Amane saw Mahiru.

In other words, Koyuki was asking what kind of person Mahiru appeared to be in Amane’s eyes. It felt like she was trying to confirm whether Amane, who Mahiru said had chosen her for who she truly was, genuinely understood her.

Amane could tell from Koyuki’s attitude that she asked out of concern for Mahiru’s well-being.

Understanding her intent, Amane found himself carefully considering how best to answer her question.

How I see Mahiru…

As Amane quietly looked over to Mahiru sitting next him, their eyes met. A mix of hope and anxiety reflected in her eyes, showing that she was eager to hear how he truly felt. Seeing that, Amane decided to be completely honest, expressing his feelings without any pretense.

"…She tends to put on a brave face and bottle things up, but deep down, she's just a lonely girl who wants to be spoiled."

That was how Amane saw Mahiru.

"*Amane-kun!?*"

"Well, I mean, don't you enjoy it when I spoil you?"

"I do! But please, don't say that so casually in front of Koyuki-san!"

Suddenly having her private, hidden side exposed, Mahiru's face turned even redder as she lightly thumped Amane's arm in protest. However, Amane had no intention of taking back his words.

"Mahiru can basically do just about anything on her own. She prefers to keep others at a distance, trying to handle everything herself. Unable to rely on others, she, in a way, shot herself in the foot, so to speak, getting trapped by the limits she set for herself."

Mahiru was always humble and reserved, rarely putting herself first. It seemed that, perhaps unconsciously, she avoided completely leaning on even Amane out of a fear of being a burden or being abandoned. This tendency was even stronger with others, as her inability to fully trust people led to an unconscious compulsion to become the *"ideal person."* As a result, she avoided showing her vulnerable side, choosing instead to wear a mask and present herself as the perfect girl to the outside world, making that facade appear completely natural.

That was the *"Angel"* everyone saw. But now, Mahiru was different.

"Now, she's learned how to rely on others, to lean on the people around her. She's chosen to let me stay by her side. She trusts me enough to show me her true self. It must have been a difficult and significant decision for Mahiru, and to me, that's a sign of her immense trust and love."

Because Mahiru believed she didn't have to put on a facade, that it was okay to rely on someone, and that she could be vulnerable, the Mahiru who was now emotionally expressive, a little wistful, and genuinely sought out Amane with an open heart existed today. Amane took pride in that as his greatest treasure.

"I told her that when she's with me, she doesn't have to act like the perfect girl. She doesn't have to try so hard. She can just be herself and rely on me. And when she's like that, she's incredibly adorable… It makes me

want to spoil her like crazy."

Having seen the transformation in Mahiru—from someone who maintained a polite, almost imperceptible barrier, always holding back, to someone who now, though still modest, openly leaned on him and revealed her true feelings—only made her even more endearing to Amane. Of course, her usual, composed, and independent self, as well as the mischievous side that sometimes tried to spoil him rotten, were undeniably adorable too. But this was a different kind of *sweet* altogether.

At times, he couldn't help but feel an overwhelming urge to completely indulge her, to the point of letting her melt into a state of pure bliss. However, he knew that doing so might go against Mahiru's own feelings. So, he set a limit, choosing to pamper her only as much as she desired. He wondered if Mahiru realized this delicate balance he was trying to maintain.

Mahiru's face had turned a deep shade of red. Trembling slightly, her embarrassment meter filled up as Amane's words continued to sink in. She looked as though she might burst into tears, but in this case, Amane hoped that this *about-to-cry* face of hers was still within the safe zone.

"Ah, but it's not just because you're cute that I want to spoil you. I really admire and respect how hardworking, dedicated, and self-disciplined you are, Mahiru. Because of that, I want to be a place of comfort for you. I don't spoil you when you don't want it!"

No matter how much Amane loved Mahiru, excessively spoiling her against her wishes wouldn't do either of them any good. He was careful not to let his own desires override what was best for her. His top priority was ensuring that Mahiru could live each day happily and peacefully, so even when he did indulge her, he never pulled out all the stops.

"Um, I swear that I would never do anything like robbing her of something precious, making one-sided demands, or hurting her—anything that you might be worried about, Kujikawa-san. I know my words right now might not hold much weight, but I have no intention of breaking this promise."

Koyuki widened her eyes slightly in surprise before letting out a soft, approving breath. Amane realized that he had understood the meaning of her question correctly. It seemed that the answer he gave was exactly what

she had been hoping to hear.

"To me, Mahiru is the girl I love and cherish, the girl I want to make happy, but she's also my equal. I don't want to burden her or ignore her opinions. I want us to talk things through and work as a team to make our time together as comfortable as possible. It's my hope that we can become each other's safe and happy place. And I truly believe that Mahiru and I can achieve that together."

Amane enjoyed spoiling Mahiru and wanted to dedicate himself to her, but he knew that Mahiru didn't want to simply be on the receiving end of that care. What Mahiru wanted was for both of them to accept each other's strengths and flaws, to grow together in a way that felt right, and to live a peaceful life filled with mutual care and understanding. It wouldn't work if it was only one-sided. They both needed to share the load, support each other, and live together as equals. This was what Mahiru desired, and it was exactly how Amane felt as well.

"So, please don't worry. I will make Mahiru happy. Together, we will *become* happy."

Even though it might have sounded a bit cheesy to anyone listening, Amane knew that these words were his genuine feelings, an unchanging belief, and a promise of continued effort. Living together meant holding mutual respect, trust, and understanding, accepting each other's differences, sharing burdens, and supporting one another. That was the path to happiness. Amane was certain that he could walk this path and strive for happiness together with Mahiru.

Although Amane felt a bit embarrassed, this was the one thing he wanted to convey with complete honesty and accuracy. Looking directly into Koyuki's eyes with sincerity, he expressed his feelings. Koyuki slowly took a deep breath, as if taking in the weight of his words.

Amane paid no mind to his quickening heartbeat as he waited for Koyuki's response. After a moment, she gave him a warm, gentle smile carrying her deepest heartfelt feelings, as if a flower had just bloomed. It was as if the tension in the room had suddenly dissipated. The subtle pressure from Koyuki that had compelled him to maintain his composure vanished without a trace.

“Once again, I am convinced that Mahiru-san has picked the right person.”

Were those words meant to reassure Amane or to reaffirm her own thoughts? The answer was unclear. However, what was certain was that he had earned her acknowledgment.

“I trusted Mahiru-san’s judgment, of course, but I wanted to be certain… I apologize for putting you on the spot. If I had any concerns about your character, I was ready to do whatever it took, even in my old age, to pull you away from her.”

Amane realized that things could have easily escalated into quite the situation had he misstepped, and he was thoroughly relieved—though he kept this to himself—that he had met Koyuki’s standards. The thought of being pulled away from Mahiru, whom he was fully committed to making happy for the rest of their lives, was unbearable. However, what would have been even more difficult to accept was the idea that he might have fallen short of Koyuki’s expectations, highlighting his own shortcomings.

“Th-There would be absolutely no need for that! Amane-kun is a great person, and his parents are lovely too…!”

“Oh my, I see you have already introduced yourself to his parents.”

Kujikawa-san might actually be similar to my mom. They zone in on the details that spark their curiosity, Amane thought for a moment. While their personalities were certainly different, there was a subtle strength in Koyuki that made her feel formidable.

“Very clever. Securing a partner who values you and then ensuring to cover all your bases is certainly an important move to make. People like that are rare these days.”

“U—Uuu… Koyuki-san, that might be a bit too blunt—wording it that way makes it sound bad. That’s not what I was trying to do…” Mahiru explained.

“Sorry,” Amane interjected. “If anything, it was me who covered all the bases.”

“*Amane-kun!?*”

"Though, actually, my mom might have done half of the work for us… She was so fired up, like she was all 'There's no way I'm missing my chance to have such a cute, polite, and wonderful daughter!'"

Looking back, Amane couldn't shake the feeling that Shihoko had been enthusiastically laying the groundwork even before he himself had fully fallen for Mahiru. Whether it was her uncanny intuition and awareness or her single-minded determination, it was clear that she had been on a mission.

There had been times when Amane had thought Shihoko's persistence was a bit much, but he couldn't deny that his parents had played a role in bringing him and Mahiru together. So, while he couldn't fully resent their involvement, as someone who wanted to handle things on his own, he sometimes wished he could tell them it was unnecessary meddling.

"…If you put it that way, I feel as though the baton was handed over to me for the second half…"

"Huh?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

Mahiru had murmured something quietly, perhaps to add to what Amane was saying, but caught up in his internal grumbling about Shihoko, he didn't catch it and asked her what she'd said. However, Mahiru, now seeming unwilling to continue, turned away with a small huff. This was a gesture she often used when trying to hide something, but Amane decided not to press her. He would just have to wait until she was ready to share it with him someday.

It seemed that the microphone had picked up Mahiru's words, and Koyuki, who had clearly heard them, responded with an amused **"Well, well, well,"** accompanied by a smile that was both playful and undeniably refined. She let the matter drop with a gentle nod of her head.

"It seems I was worrying over nothing after all. Perhaps with old age comes too much caution… I apologize for my unnecessary meddling and concern," Koyuki said, lowering her gaze to reflect on her actions. When Mahiru looked as though she might protest, Koyuki gently stopped her with a glance **"With this, I have finally put a long-standing worry of mine to rest. Though I am no longer in any position to**

interfere, I couldn't help but agonize over where Mahiru-san's path would lead."

Barely audible, Amane heard a quiet "Ah—" from beside him.

"But now, I see that everything will be all right. After seeing how things are now, I feel confident in leaving her in your care. I know it might seem presumptuous of me to say, as an outsider who has already been separated from her once before, but as an adult who has looked after Mahiru-san in the past, those are my honest feelings."

Koyuki had been testing Amane, all with Mahiru's best interests in mind. Amane understood this well. From Mahiru's early years, Koyuki had been by her side to protect her from loneliness, to ensure she was properly educated so she wouldn't be harmed by others, and to help her grow into someone who wouldn't face difficulties in the future. She had nurtured Mahiru with abundant love, ensuring that she wouldn't lose all hope in people and that she could one day open her heart to someone.

And now, after all the love and care she had poured into Mahiru, Koyuki had decided that it was safe to pass the torch to Amane.

"Next time, please come visit me together. I would very much love to introduce you to my son and his wife as well. I will tell them about my other adorable child and her boyfriend. Oh, and don't worry, my son won't get jealous just because I've gained one or two more children."

After hearing Koyuki call her her child, Mahiru seemed unable to hold back any longer. The tears that had once subsided now flowed freely again, as if she were making up for all the tears she hadn't shed throughout her life. The fragile layers of the defenses she built seemed to peel away, and with faint sobs, Mahiru let herself cry without restraint.

Seeing Mahiru cry so openly, Koyuki's expression softened into one of pure, maternal love, her smile warm and enveloping. Together with Amane, she quietly waited for Mahiru to navigate the waves of her emotions on her own.

"Ufufu, but I haven't given my blessing for marriage just yet. I need to see with my own eyes what kind of gentleman he is, not just through a video call."

As Mahiru began to calm down, Koyuki playfully and deliberately announced her intentions, causing Amane to nearly choke on his breath. He tried to respond, his lips trembling slightly, but the knowing look Koyuki gave him—one that implied she understood exactly what Amane had planned—left him speechless. All he could do was let his lips quiver in silence.

I knew it! At her core, she's just like my mom!

The idea of Koyuki and Shihoko teaming up sent shivers down his spine. They had the potential to become the second most lethal people to Amane (first was Chitose). However, the fact that Koyuki didn't immediately follow up with more teasing showed she was a bit more forgiving compared to Shihoko or Chitose.

Sensing that Amane wasn't able to respond strongly, Koyuki let out a small laugh. Then, she straightened her posture and turned back to face Mahiru. Her expression softened into one that radiated pure maternal love, the kind of look only a mother would give her beloved child.

"Remember, don't hesitate to come visit us. We'll greet you two with open arms."

"…Okay!" exclaimed Mahiru, excited.

"Thank you so much," Amane replied.

It felt almost as if they had just promised to give their greetings to Mahiru's parent's family, bringing with it a mix of both a gentle warmth and a rising sense of joy and relief. Amane's mouth softened into a smile, and Mahiru, overwhelmed with happiness, let a single tear fall from her eyes, one she thought had already dried up. Koyuki welcomed them both with a beautiful, warm smile.

"Oh, and if you ever make Mahiru-san cry, I will show you no mercy."

"…Though *I* wasn't the one who made her cry just now, was I?"

"Oh, that's…" Koyuki giggled, "Let's let it slide just this once then, shall we?"

Seeing Koyuki's playful smile, both Amane and Mahiru exchanged glances, unable to hold back their own laughter, their faces breaking into amused smiles.

“If it’s tears of joy, then by all means, make her cry as much as you like. Mahiru-san isn’t very used to experiencing happiness, so please make up for all the joy she has missed out on.”

“Then I won’t hold back. I’ll do my best to keep making her cry tears of happiness.”

“Wai— Amane-kun!?”

Mahiru, flustered by what Amane had said, looked like she wanted to protest, but Amane had no intention of taking back his words.

Making her cry from sadness or anger was, of course, out of the question. But tears of joy were something entirely different. Tears were the overflow of emotions from the heart, and if those emotions were positive, if they stemmed from happiness, then there’s no reason to shy away from them. Considering all the chances for such joy that Mahiru missed in the past, no one could fault Amane for wanting to bring her as much happiness as possible now. And if he were the only one to witness and share in those joyful tears, no one could criticize him for that either.

“Then I will leave it to you,” said Koyuki. **“… Mahiru-san, let him bring you lots of happiness. The next time we meet, you can share all those stories with me. I’ll be looking forward to the opportunity.”**

Amane’s response seemed to satisfy Koyuki, as she smiled warmly, her bright expression full of affection as she gazed softly at the two of them. It was a look that reminded him of the way Shihoko had once looked at him.

“Well then, until next time. May Mahiru-san continue to live happily and healthily.”

With a clear, unwavering voice, Koyuki wished for Mahiru’s future health and happiness. Her words carried no hint of doubt, and with a gentle, wistful glance at the emotionally moved Mahiru, she ended the call, leaving the screen to fade into darkness. The now-blank screen reflected only their own images and the room’s decorations. Though the farewell had been brief, Amane’s heart was filled with a warm, lingering sense of contentment that remained long after the call ended.

That warmth was surely felt by Mahiru as well. She continued to stare at the blank screen as if still absorbing the lingering emotions, her gaze reflecting the happiness she had just experienced… After a moment, she

slowly leaned toward Amane, resting her head against his shoulder and arm in a fawning gesture. Mahiru then took a deep, calming breath, settling into the moment.

As Mahiru's silky hair gently flowed over her shoulders, rising and falling with her breaths, Amane quietly waited, giving her the space and time she needed to organize her thoughts.

"…Amane-kun."

"Yeah?"

A quiet, soft call.

"I…am not quite sure what to say. I'm so happy that I feel like my head has gotten all messed up… Not once in my life did I imagine that a day like this would come."

Surely, deep down, Mahiru had longed for this—to connect with Koyuki like family.

But, she never had the resolve to make it happen on her own.

Mahiru had always tended to prioritize others. And more than that, she was hesitant, perhaps even a bit fearful.

Even though Mahiru could have easily found ways to contact Koyuki—through a call, a letter, or even a visit—she hadn't done so. Amane suspected it was because, deep down, Mahiru had been afraid of being rejected by even her caretaker, unconsciously holding herself back.

While he still reflected on the fact that he had stirred up those fears and anxieties, Amane had no regrets about reaching out to Koyuki. After all, the look of fulfillment on Mahiru's face now, after everything had come to an end, made it clear that it had been the right decision.

"…Did that bring a bit more joy to your heart?"

Amane knew it was bad of him to ask a question when he already knew the answer. But he couldn't help it—he wanted to hear it from her, no matter what. Even if it was just for his own satisfaction, he needed to know if he had truly brought happiness to his sweet beloved girlfriend.

"Of course. Um, I'm so happy I can't keep it all inside—my head feels all fuzzy, and my heart is racing… But when I think about it ending, it makes me feel a little sad. My emotions are all over the place right now."

"Yeah, you went through a lot today. Let's take it in little by little, okay?"

Mahiru spoke in a voice softer and more childlike than usual, her words more like an attempt to sort through the emotions swirling within her than an effort to convey them to Amane. He responded with gentle nods, not rushing her, letting her take her time.

Still struggling to navigate the waves of emotion that had swept over her, Mahiru shifted from leaning on his shoulder to wrapping her arm around his, pressing her face against his upper arm. She rubbed her forehead against him, as if trying to release the pent-up emotions within her. Amane couldn't help but let out a soft chuckle, extending his free hand to gently smooth the strands of her tousled, flaxen hair.

"…Don't worry, this happiness is here to stay. Just take your time and savor it. Together, let's make sure we never forget all the good things that happened today."

"…Okay."

"I hope that someday, when we look back on today, you can smile and remember it as a day of true happiness."

I want this day to become one of many happy memories we will share together.

Amane wanted to create countless happy memories with Mahiru in the days to come, and he was determined to make her happy. He hoped that today would be remembered not just as a singular day of happiness, but as one of many moments of joy they would share.

"…Hey, your birthday isn't over yet, you know?"

"I'm already satisfied—I'm so full I feel like I might burst."

"Is that so? Well I can't have that… We still have some cake left."

Amane knew exactly what Mahiru meant by feeling *"full,"* but he deliberately played along, making a mock-disappointed face as he lamented about the leftover cake. In response, Mahiru shyly pressed her forehead against his arm, as if seeking comfort and affection.

"…If you feed me, maybe I can eat a little more."

"Sure. If that's what you'd like, then I'll do it as many times as you want."

Mahiru looked up at Amane with a hint of expectation in her eyes, a sign that she was trying to rely on him and express her needs in her own way. Amane, knowing he had the capacity to accept her feelings, gently patted

her head, as if to say he would fulfill anything she desired.

Mahiru's eyes narrowed in contentment. "Well, I can't eat all of it, so I'll feed you too, Amane-kun."

"Thanks… Next year, I'll make a smaller cake. That way, we can finish it together without feeling stuffed."

"So next year, too…"

Hearing the words *"next year,"* Mahiru softly repeated them, as if embracing the thought. She was likely picturing a future not far off, where she would still be by Amane's side. Her cheeks flushed gently yet strikingly, like a soft glow of light in the dark, and she looked up at him with a gaze that carried a hint of expectancy she couldn't hide.

Amane was overjoyed seeing Mahiru look forward to the future so eagerly, showing no signs of dread toward her birthday and instead feeling only anticipation. He could feel this happiness welling up from within, and it naturally spread across his face, reflecting the warmth in his heart.

"Of course, next year too. Are you looking forward to it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'm glad. I'm looking forward to it too."

The days ahead spent with Mahiru, the joy of being able to make her happy, the exhilaration of knowing she trusted and believed in him—all of these things were Amane's source of happiness, his joy, and his excitement for the future.

And now, Amane knew with complete confidence that Mahiru felt the same way.

" …Thank you so much for being born, and for falling in love with me. I promise to make you happy."

Those words had tumbled out of Amane's mouth, not necessarily meant for Mahiru to hear, but it seemed they reached her loud and clear. Her glossy amber eyes opened wide in surprise, then she softened her face to show a sweet, almost melting smile. With that, she relaxed, leaning into Amane, fully trusting and surrendering herself to his embrace.

Bonus Chapter

Behind the Scenes: The Happiest Day in the World

“(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs.”

“What are you looking at, Mahiru?”

Once Mahiru had settled down after finishing her call with Koyuki, Amane noticed that her eyes were glued to her smartphone screen as she sat next to him and decided to ask about it.

Did something happen? Mahiru wasn’t one to use her smartphone for a prolonged period of time, so Amane wondered whether anything was wrong. Hearing his voice, Mahiru turned to face him.

Her expression was much softer than usual.

Chitose Shirakawa

Mahirun! Happy birthday! I let Amane take the number one spot, but second place is mine! ...I was second, right? Big congrats! Now we're the same age!

By the way, how was Amane's party? We were all suuuper excited to help out but his enthusiasm was something else! He just loves you so much, doesn't he~? ♥

We can't beat the party he made for his beloved Mahirun, but we want to celebrate your birthday too, so prepare yourself once we're off our break. Oh, and don't worry, we won't do it in the classroom! We'll do it at Amane's place! Gonna get his permission now!

So yeah, I know it's already nighttime, but... I hope you have a wonderful birthday. I'm sure Amane's sat next to you right now, so make sure he spoils you lots ♥

Itsuki Akazawa

Happy birthday, Shiina-san.

Sorry for the sudden message, but I wanted to give my greetings too.
To be honest, I wasn't sure whether it was okay for me to celebrate since I heard that you don't really like other people knowing your birthday, but Amane said it was fine if we knew. So please excuse me.

Congratulations!
I believe that it's thanks to you that not only Amane, but all of us have been able to change for the better.
Thank you.

Once again, happy birthday!

P.S. Chi has a tendency to be pushy at times. If you don't like what she's doing, just turn her down clearly.
Also, if Amane starts sulking because of Chi, please comfort him. I ask this of you in advance.

Ayaka Kido

Happy birthday, Shiina-san.

I'm a bit anxious because I wasn't sure if I could celebrate too, but since I really want to, I'm secretly sending you this birthday message!

I'm sure Fujimiya-kun is celebrating with you lots today, so I would like to properly celebrate the occasion myself another time.

Oh, and rest assured! Project: Fujimiya-kun Body Transformation is proceeding without a hitch!

Fujimiya-kun himself is actually quite enthusiastic about it all. It's like he's ready to do anything for you. It really brings a smile to my face.

He's working really hard to get the muscles you like, so please cheer him on!

On that note, I'll see you at school!

Shihoko Fujimiya

Happy birthday, Mahiru-chan!!!

Dear me, I really wanted to celebrate in person, but work got in the way...as did Amane and Shuuto-san. But even so, my desire to celebrate your special day is second to none! Weeell, actually, maybe second to Amane?

Nonetheless, I would like to thank you for being born. I am truly glad and grateful that you were brought into this world. So much so that I want to give you a big hug immediately!

But since I can't, I have no choice but to save the hug for the next time we meet. For now, make sure to get one from Amane for me!

Now I can't wait to see you again! Would our next chance be during the New Year's holidays, perhaps? We could come to see you, but you should also come back to visit us sometime. Next year, you won't be able to make time with all your exams, so I would be happy if you considered paying us a visit soon!

Well, until next time! I hope this year will be a wonderful one for you, Mahiru-chan!

Shuuto Fujimiya

Sorry for the sudden message. There is something I wanted to say, so I took the liberty of contacting you.

Shiina-san, happy birthday. Knowing you were born into this world, I'm as happy as if you were my own child.

Ideally, I would have liked to convey this message in person, but as circumstances did not allow it, I settled for sending a message. For that, I do apologize. I also didn't want to just call you out of the blue...though Shihoko-san here is itching to do just that.

Ah, Shihoko-san may have already mentioned this, but regarding your return home—please know that you should make the decision that is best for you both. There's no need to force yourselves to come back if you have plans or want to spend time with your friends. Please think about them first. After all, winter break is a precious event that will only come once for second year students like yourselves. Please discuss it carefully with Amane and decide together.

Well then, Shiina-san.
I hope the days you spend will be filled with happiness.

“Happy birthday messages from everyone,” Mahiru answered.

“Ahh,” Amane replied. “How nice of them.”

Since Amane had been given the privilege of celebrating Mahiru’s birthday in person on the actual day, all their friends could only send their birthday wishes through messages. In hindsight, he felt a tinge of guilt for taking away his friends’ chance to celebrate the day together with Mahiru, but he knew they had all agreed to let him handle everything. Amane thanked his friends once again in his mind.

In return, he would likely be grilled for details or teased heavily for it on Monday, but he was prepared to accept that. Bracing himself for the next day of school, Amane tensed his cheeks ever so slightly. Mahiru, however, seemed to notice and continued to wear a sweet, soft smile, as if she was experiencing a dream come true.

“Indeed,” Mahiru replied. “…I’m really happy. I’ve never experienced a birthday like this before.”

“I see. Well, you’d better get used to it soon because this will be our annual tradition from now on, okay?”

“…I wonder how long it will take for me to get used to it.”

“I plan to do this every year, so let me know as soon as you do. But even so, I’ll do my best to blow you off your feet every year.”

“…I can’t have you making my heart race too often… I think my eyes are a little swollen.” Her slightly sulky tone made her sound more embarrassed than truly displeased. Mahiru was right—her eyes had indeed turned slightly reddish and swollen, but what stood out even more was the blush adorning her cheeks.

“You didn’t like it?”

“Of course I liked it… It’s just that now, I realize how truly blessed I’ve become.”

“Well, I plan to make you even happier than this, so I’ll keep stepping things up year after year.”

Considering everything he had done so far, it was likely still not enough. Amane wanted to make Mahiru the happiest girl alive, so next year, he

would have to spend even more time researching her preferences, what she wanted, and what would make her truly happy.

By the time her birthday rolled around next year, Amane planned to have acquired a certain item he wished to give her.

Whether Mahiru would be pleased with it or not remained uncertain—but even so, Amane still wanted to make a vow to her.

A precious, once-in-a-lifetime promise.

Mahiru giggled. “In that case, I will also strive to do my best for you, Amane-kun. Of course, without pushing myself.”

“…Just don’t do anything that’ll blow my mind too hard…”

“No promises. Please look forward to next year.”

“…You should look forward to it too, Mahiru.”

“Yes, I will.”

“Mm-hmm. Me too.”

Even though they knew they were getting ahead of themselves, they acknowledged that they were both looking forward to next year’s birthday. Amane and Mahiru, as if drawn together by an unspoken yet mutual agreement, leaned in closer to one another.

“ …I can’t wait,” Amane murmured, feeling the warmth from her lips. He gently stroked her slender ring finger, and Mahiru, not seeming to mind, entrusted herself completely to him, her eyes narrowing out of immense comfort. Taking another look at her, Amane found her so endearing that he closed the distance between them once again, robbing Mahiru of her vision and drawing her into another kiss.

Animate SS

A Glimpse of Light in the Depths of Mire

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 9 from the Animate Bookstore in Japan

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

After receiving the schedule survey form for the parent-teacher meeting, Mahiru returned to her room and carelessly placed the printout onto her desk. Since she needed to submit it back to the school, she didn't throw it away. Had it not been required, she would have tossed it into the trash without a moment's hesitation.

Every year, Mahiru's heart stirred with unease whenever the meetings were held. Now, that feeling had calmed down to mere ripples compared to the past, and in a way, Mahiru had come to terms with the meetings after making her way through middle and high school with nothing but her own power. She had long since resigned herself to the situation, and now her heart merely tingled slightly—nothing more.

Indeed. She was long used to it, and she no longer even wished for it to come true. Knowing full well that her parents would never come and would never look back, she didn't bother contacting them at all. To her, doing so would be a complete waste of time.

Mahiru intended to write on the form that her parents were unavailable due to personal reasons, and that any date for the meeting would be fine. She had taken it out of her bag and placed it on her desk only for that purpose. If she wasn't quick, Amane might start to worry while he waited for her at his apartment, but despite it being a matter of writing just a single line, Mahiru found herself incapable of picking up the pen. She pressed her lips together tightly.

"…After so long, why am I…"

It was inevitable.

There was no reason to hesitate.

All she had to do was write that her parents wouldn't come.

That was all, yet for some reason, her mind was suddenly swamped by a feeling of overwhelming emptiness and resistance.

Last year, there was only a faint, unpleasant feeling, like black ink bleeding into her heart. So why was her heart so shaken this year?

It must be because I met Amane-kun.

Amane was both to *blame*, and to *thank* for this change.

Through Amane, she had seen what it was like to be a child who was loved above all else. She had witnessed the peaceful, bright, and beautiful light of someone who lived a cherished life filled with happiness. Because she had been scorched by that dazzlingly beautiful light, because it was burned so intensely into her eyes, she became dismayed and disappointed by the stark difference between Amane's reality and her own.

Even though she kept telling herself that she had given up and given up, she still longed for it, envied it, and dreamt of it. Regret settled in and she felt pathetic as she clung to those feelings—she couldn't help but hate herself for it. Worse yet, she found herself momentarily directing those dark feelings toward Amane. That made her feel more ashamed than anything else. If she told him, she could see him smile with a sad face and accept her feelings. He would embrace her without as much as a word. No one knew how much Mahiru longed for family and affection more than he did. Surely, if she bared her suffering, he would accept it.

It was precisely because she understood that so well that Mahiru had to swallow down all her feelings before going to Amane's place. Her anxiety, envy, inferiority, and longing—all of it—she needed to process it herself so that she could face it square on.

She couldn't keep clinging to the hope she wanted to hold onto forever.

"It will all be okay."

Am I really facing forward now? With such thoughts in mind as she encouraged herself, Mahiru picked up the pen that had been lying on her desk and pressed the tip firmly against the paper.

Bookwalker SS

Worries About the Future

Obtainable by Pre-Ordering Volume 9 from Bookwalker JP

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"Do you ever get worried, Mahirun?"

Chitose, who had been frantically cramming for the test, seemed to have lost her concentration. She placed her mechanical pencil on the desk and suddenly blurted out that question.

Studying at Mahiru's house meant there were no prying eyes, of course. Taking advantage of the situation, Chitose began rolling around on the carpet, her gaze still fixed on Mahiru.

"Would that not depend on what you're asking about specifically?" Mahiru returned.

"…The future?"

"That's quite vague. Are you asking about my worries regarding education or employment prospects, perhaps?"

"Well, those would be included too. I guess, when you take all those things into account, just…*everything*?"

"I see. I understand what you're trying to say. As someone who will soon prepare for entrance exams, you have worries about the future with your partner and university, and you would like some advice regarding that."

Chitose must have had a lot to think about after the parent-teacher conferences—particularly in relation to further education and matters related to Itsuki's family home.

Only a select few, likely Itsuki, Mahiru, and Amane, knew that Chitose, who usually acts energetically, occasionally showed signs of anxiety. This time, instead of consulting the very person at the heart of her worries, she must have chosen Mahiru, a fellow woman in a similar situation, as her confidant.

“Mahirun, you’re…with Amane, aren’t you?”

“Indeed, and as long as Amane-kun’s feelings never change, that’s exactly where I hope to be.”

“Do you ever worry that his feelings might change?”

“If I claimed to have not, then that would be a lie. But I believe that there are aspects of both Amane-kun and myself that are resolute and unshakeable. Besides…”

“Besides?”

“I’m confident that for Amane-kun, there is no better girl out there than me,” Mahiru smiled brightly.

Chitose let out a wry laugh and said, “You’ve got me there. That confidence and pride just screams you, Mahirun… You know just how much you’re loved and that effort is being made. No wonder Amane is so smitten with you. He can’t even consider anyone else.”

“And I won’t ever let him look elsewhere.”

While it was unlikely that Amane would ever direct his attention at someone else, Mahiru was determined to make sure he only had eyes for her. She had no intention of becoming complacent just because she knew he loved her.

“Chitose-san. If you have decided to stand by Akazawa-san’s side, you must face forward with confidence. I don’t believe that effort will always be rewarded without fail, but I do think that if you put in the effort, nobody will be able to overlook that hard work… I doubt even Akazawa-san’s father would be able to ignore you either.”

“You’re kind but strict, aren’t you, Mahirun?” Her words were uttered softly, containing a bitterness different to anger, and somewhere within, a dash of positivity.

“Friendship isn’t just about offering sweet and sugary advice.”

“Yeah, you’re right… I like that about you, Mahirun.”

“Thank you. I also like your straightforward and flexible nature, Chitose-san.” Mahiru’s comment, which might have been frowned upon if said to someone else, was sincerely accepted by Chitose. Mahiru smiled at her, and as Chitose got up, they faced each other once more, with Chitose reaching to grip her mechanical pencil again.

“All right, let’s keep at it… Although having just said that, I want something sweet, Captain!”

“There’s no way around it, I suppose. There’s cake in the fridge, so I’ll bring it over once it has thawed enough.”

“I love you, Mahirun~!”

Gamers SS

Worries After Returning Home

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 9 from the Gamers Bookstore in Japan

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"I'm home~! Everything went smoothly with Amane today." Upon coming home from a long day after attending the parent-teacher meetings, Shihoko was promptly greeted by Shuuto's trademark gentle smile.

It seemed that, despite being a busy man, he'd still managed to return home earlier than Shihoko, as she had taken the bullet train back home after catching up with Mahiru. Now dressed in his loungewear, he welcomed her with the best news under the sun, "Welcome home. You must be tired, so I prepared dinner." Shihoko thanked him and the two of them entered the living room together.

The aroma of spices wafted from the kitchen, a tell-tale sign that curry was tonight's meal. Shuuto would make curry from scratch, selecting spices he liked based on his mood that day, and from past experience, Shihoko already knew that it would taste amazing. She found herself smiling involuntarily and had to consciously rein in her expression.

"Granted, I wasn't too worried, but I'm glad that there weren't any problems nonetheless," Shuuto stated. "Our boy is doing well for himself, and that's all that truly matters."

"You say that, but I could tell that you really wanted to go too."

"Of course. As a father, I wanted to hear all about what the school thought of our adorable son. I'm sorry for leaving it all to you, Shihoko-san."

"My, I don't think it could be helped. Had you forced yourself to come, Amane might have gotten mad and said, 'You don't have to go out of your way to come every time even when you're so busy with work.'"

"Yeah, that is something he would say."

As Amane was quite considerate of his parents, he would undoubtedly scold Shihoko and Shuuto if they unnecessarily made time just for him. As her schedule allowed for it, Shihoko had managed to free up some time from work well in advance, so Amane didn't voice any complaints this time around. However, it was easy to imagine that if they both went together, Amane would have told them, "*You're forcing yourself to come again.*"

"Oh, and speaking of our adorable son, I have some news about our adorable daughter."

"Did something happen with Shiina-san?"

"Ah, well…" Shihoko paused for several moments. "As I suspected, Mahiru-chan isn't on good terms with her parents. She told me that she didn't even inform them of the meeting."

Shihoko wasn't as familiar with the specifics as Amane was, and given that it wasn't nice to pry, she had no intention of touching the subject until Mahiru was ready to talk. However, even from the little she could see, Shihoko understood that it was a result of something deeply rooted in Mahiru's family environment. Fortunately, Mahiru didn't show any signs of gloom today, and with Amane by her side, Shihoko wasn't too worried about her emotional well-being.

"When parents aren't there to help their child plan their future, it makes for a large burden on the child's shoulders. Mahiru-chan may be a very responsible girl, but seeing her take on all the responsibilities that adults should handle by herself makes me worried."

"I agree. We'll do anything in our power to help her, but…in the end, we're just outsiders."

"Goodness. How I wish they'd just hurry up and get married already. Then she'd officially be our daughter, and we would be able to support her in every way possible!"

"You need a parent's signature to file a marriage registration before becoming an adult, so it's easier said than done. In any case, it's for them to decide, so we can't force them along now, can we? You know how adults tend to pressure the younger ones, so we shouldn't push them forward too quickly. Even if we can't do it as her parents, I think we should focus on the support we can provide as adults."

"…Okaaaay." While Shihoko understood, she still felt frustrated that she wasn't able to fully take the place of Mahiru's real parents. With a slight pout residing on her lips, she returned to her room to get changed.

Melon Books SS

Hesitation, and a Source of Great Worry

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 9 from the Melon Books Bookstore in Japan

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Amane considered himself to have a rather good memory. While he didn't possess any abilities as grand as a photographic memory, he was capable of memorizing things in a shorter span of time than most and retained that information for longer. Up until now, his memory had served him well in his studies and daily life, but this time, he found himself cursing his great memory.

I…ended up catching a glimpse…

Although it was nothing more than a brief glance, he had perfectly memorized the string of text that entered his vision. As he pondered what to do about it, he ended up ruminating over it too much and firmly cemented it in his memory—that *thing*.

Since it was personal information, the proper course of action would be to forget it as soon as he could. To even consider using it was out of the question. That would be highly inappropriate behavior for any individual, and Amane could imagine how shocked and suspicious the other party would be to suddenly receive contact from a stranger.

Thus, he shouldn't act on it—all the common sense and reason that he had amassed so far in his life was telling him to erase it from his mind as quickly as possible. Yet…

…This is exactly *what Mahiru wants and needs right now, isn't it?*

Determined to make this Mahiru's best birthday yet, Amane was prepared to pull out all the stops and leave no stone unturned. For the sake of Mahiru's smile, he was confident he could face any difficulty, no matter how challenging. In all likelihood, this would be his greatest chance to make

Mahiru truly happy. That is, if Amane succeeded in overcoming the things holding back his moral mind.

Even if I do reach out to this person, there's no guarantee that they would even respond.

Anyone would be suspicious in the event that a stranger contacted them out of the blue. Being ignored was the most likely outcome.

However, if by some chance they were willing to listen to what I have to say, then…

That one flicker of hope was the cause of Amane's hesitation.

Heaving a deep sigh, Amane laid face down on his bed, a glimpse of the cat plushie he received from Mahiru entering his field of view. Facing it, the plushie's eyes seemed to ask, *What're you even doing?* with an unmistakably cold and to the point attitude, making Amane sigh once more.

"…Taking that first step is what's worrying me."

While he was conflicted due to facing a moral dilemma among other things, above all, Amane was afraid. Afraid of reaching out to the person who had shaped Mahiru's very being today, reaching even the deepest parts of her heart. Amane was afraid of being rejected.

And what if…if even Mahiru were to be rejected too? To be told that she no longer had any connection to them, to have that close hand pulled away from her?

The thought that Amane, an outsider, might end up as the trigger for a rejection of that nature made even the resolve he had mustered falter and freeze in place. From what Amane had heard, this individual didn't seem like the type of person to do such a thing, and he could say for certain that they cared deeply for Mahiru. Yet, for him to step into this, it was indeed a path too tender for him to tread.

"…Seriously, what should I do?" Amane muttered softly, to no one but himself.

Turning over, he picked up the note he had written himself and held it up to the light above him, closing his eyes.

Suruga-ya SS

Are Café Workers Really That Popular?

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 9 from the Suruga-ya Bookstore in Japan

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"By the way, Fujimiya, what's your girlfriend like?"

Amane was currently working at the coffee shop, and it was nearly time for them to close up. Since there were no customers to be seen and the last order time had already passed, they were effectively already closed. Miyamoto, who was working the same shift as Amane, suddenly asked this question as he cleaned down the kitchen.

"Haven't you asked me that before?"

"Have I? Well, come on, just humor me. Lemme know what you think about her now."

"Why are you interested in that all of a sudden?" It wasn't that Amane mistrusted Miyamoto as a person, but he felt embarrassed to chat about his girlfriend so openly. He didn't want others to know about her, either. After being reluctant to answer, Amane noticed Miyamoto smile wryly.

After a few moments of silence, Miyamoto began, "…You're being *super* cautious, huh? Don't worry, it's not like I'm going to tease you or ask for a photo or something."

"I'm just worried I might say too much," Amane clarified.

If asked, Amane could talk about his girlfriend until the end of time. However, he would be left feeling incredibly embarrassed afterwards. To avoid flipping that switch in his mind, Amane wanted to steer away from talking about her at all.

"Hah hah! You're totally smitten. Head over heels."

"Please be quiet."

"Isn't that a bit harsh? I'm your senior, you know."

"I'm sooorry."

As they both knew that they were only messing around, they could throw lighthearted jokes back and forth. However, Amane would never forget that Miyamoto was his senior, and knew not to get too carried away.

"She must be a really nice girl for you to fall so hard for her. I bet you have a good eye for women—maybe even a *strict* eye.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Hmm? Uh, I mean, aren't you a popular guy?"

"No, not once in my life have I been popular… She's my first ever girlfriend."

Before he started dating Mahiru and even up until now, Amane had no recollection of ever being popular. While he had received the odd compliment about his appearance, no one other than Mahiru had shown any kind of romantic interest in him. Had someone fell for him, they must have not made their feelings known through words or actions. Therefore, he could confidently say that he had never been popular.

"Oh, your *first* girlfriend, huh?"

"May I ask what that grin is for?"

"Nothin'? Just thought your girlfriend must have her hands full."

"I'm well aware that I have my shortcomings. There are times where I can't understand her feelings and upset her, or times when I make her feel lonely. But that's why I make it a point to spend as much time with her as I can when we are together."

"You don't get it at all, do you…? That's *exactly* what I mean. I'm more worried about what people might do *to you* than what you might be doing for her."

Amane was dumbfounded. "Huh…? What do you mean?"

"Being a café worker can make you fairly popular, you know?"

"True, the ladies and gentleman here do take a liking to me."

"Yeah, not what I meant…"

Miyamoto looked at him pitifully, which irritated Amane slightly. Whether Miyamoto knew how he felt or not, he simply sighed. From a different kind of exasperation, Amane could only sigh along.

Toranoana SS

Everything is but a Challenge

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 9 from the Toranoana Bookstore in Japan

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"It's flat. Darn it."

Recently, Amane had been learning how to bake a sponge cake. But as soon as he attempted the entire process alone with no one to help him, the result was the floppy, sad-looking sponge cake that now sat in front of him. It looked like it had lost its will to live. It would have been fluffier while it was still fresh, but after leaving it for a while, it had turned out like this. Amane was just as deflated as the sponge cake.

Fumika, who had been encouraging Amane and watching over his work, wore a gentle smile as she looked at the sponge cake that, despite its wonderful smell, was a complete failure in the looks department.

"Here, I think you overmixed it when adding the flour after beating the eggs. And then, you waited too long and overmixed it again when adding the butter at the end. The fat and grease likely destroyed the air bubbles."

As he was still not used to making it, Amane had been following a recipe while learning from Fumika. However, he had issues with his tendency to overmix due to his concerns about whether the ingredients were binding properly, so Fumika's observations hit home. Fumika probably wanted to step in and offer advice along the way, but she respected Amane's wish to try it on his own. Grateful for this, he listened attentively to her gentle critiques.

"See, Fujimiya-kun, your tendency to be thorough actually worked against you this time."

"I am reflecting on my mistakes."

"It's okay; it's okay. Mistakes happen often. It takes practice, and you know what they say: 'Failure is the mother of success.' Let's try making it again, this time keeping the points I mentioned in mind."

“I’m really sorry for taking up your precious time. And your ingredients too…”

“My, don’t give it a second thought. I’ll use the failed cakes for a tiramisu. Besides, we have some little ones waiting for scraps just over there.”

“Waiting for scraps…?”

After following Fumika’s gaze, Amane noticed Oohashi peeking in from the entrance with a guilty expression that seemed to say, *“Uh-oh, we’re busted!”* Behind her also stood Miyamoto.

“…You weren’t waiting for me to mess up, were you?” Amane probed.

“How rude! We just thought that either way, we’d get a snack—whether you messed up or succeeded!”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Now, now. Not so fast. I think eating the dishes you’ve messed up and finding ways to improve is a very important part of the process,” Oohashi clarified.

“In other words?” asked Amane.

“*In other words*, she just wants to get her hands on some treats,” Miyamoto interjected.

“Rich coming from you, Daichi. As if you weren’t after the same thing,” retorted Oohashi, to which Miyamoto suddenly turned away. Amane couldn’t help but chuckle at the amusing scene before him, and Fumika also smiled gently.

“All right, let’s practice making the decorations for now, shall we?” Fumika suggested. “…And then after closing, it’s snack time.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Amane and Fumika looked at each other and exchanged smiles, making the hungry pair wait just a little bit longer.

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

As one of her principles, Mahiru always held herself to a high level of self-discipline. Showing her careless or vulnerable side to others was something she couldn't stand, especially in public spaces. This didn't change even with Amane, her boyfriend. While she did relax more around him compared to others, she still carried a much more composed and diligent air about her compared to Amane's laid-back attitude. She was so diligent, in fact, that it sometimes made him worry about her.

That was how Mahiru always acted, but there was one exception to this rule of hers that occurred only when certain special conditions were met.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

"...Th-This is not okay," Mahiru said, her voice trembling as she looked at one corner of the living room.

The windows in the apartment were relatively large, letting plenty of light into the room. In the open space in front of these windows, the notorious 'evil' beanbag sofa from Amane's room was proudly positioned. The sofa was adorned with the cushion Amane often used as well as Mahiru's favorite blanket. The air conditioning was set to the perfect level for comfort, and UV-cut lace curtains were drawn to create a softly lit, cozy space while protecting against sunburn.

The spring sunlight spilling through the laced curtains was soft and pleasant. Combined with the mild temperature, it was the perfect setup for anyone to drift off while basking in the gentle light. The environment was meticulously prepared to be irresistibly inviting. Mahiru, realizing that

everything was set in place specifically for her, trembled slightly, clearly understanding its purpose.

"Is something the matter?" Amane asked.

"Y–You set all of this up to just make me feel lazy, didn't you!?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Don't just nod along like it's nothing!"

"I mean, with weather this perfect and everything taken care of, now's the perfect time to relax. We should take it easy."

As of late, things had been getting busier and busier, but today, he had wrapped up everything he'd set out to do. Mahiru had also completed her tasks in the morning so that she could relax in the afternoon, which was the very reason why this setup was prepared.

"C-Could you not relax on your own, Amane-kun?"

"Huh? No, I don't wanna. I'll be lonely… Can't we relax together?"

"I— …It's not that we *can't*! But I'm sure you're fully aware that I can't resist when you make that face!"

"Yep."

Having been together for a considerable amount of time, Amane grasped Mahiru's personality quite well. He knew that if he showed a hint of expectation and loneliness, Mahiru would—to an extent—become more accommodating. Of course, he would never ask her to do something she genuinely disliked. This time, his goal was to turn her hesitation into something she could accept by making it seem like it was for his sake.

"…You've really begun to figure out how to use your facial expressions to your advantage recently, haven't you?"

"Whether it's objectively attractive or not, I know you also love my face, Mahiru."

"I–It's not like I chose you for your looks!"

"Yeah, that's why I said 'also'."

"U-Uuu…"

"Don't worry, I think I understand you pretty well. At least, I think I do. In actuality, I might not always be right, but I think I'm spot on this time."

"…Dummy."

Amane knew that Mahiru's *"dummy"* meant that she had finally given in. When he smiled at her sulking face, she glared at him even more with her narrowed eyes.

"…You're becoming less cute now," Mahiru said.

"Then what am I becoming instead?"

"And the way you can say things like that is *exactly* why."

This *"…You're becoming less cute now"* was likely both a complaint and a compliment. If it were the old Amane, he wouldn't have had the confidence to assert that Mahiru loved him so openly. Mahiru knew that this newfound confidence of his came with him being assured of her love for him. That said, his new 'lack of cuteness' also meant that Amane had become harder for her to handle, which left Mahiru with mixed feelings.

However, it seemed that this change was not one Mahiru disliked. Feeling reassured, Amane laughed and accepted her slightly sulky attitude as she gently thumped his arm in mild protest.

"I mean, I've already finished all my homework and chores. Dinner prep is done, I did all the shopping and cleaning in the morning, and I've reached my study goal for the day already. You also cleared your schedule for the afternoon, didn't you?"

"I–I may have, but still! I–If you prepare something like this, I'll…end up becoming lazy."

"Yep, that's kinda my goal."

Since Mahiru was always strict with, and rarely treated herself, Amane thought it was important for them to create and spend time together relaxing. Besides, another big factor was that he simply wanted to spend a slow, leisurely time with Mahiru.

"Why do you want to see your girlfriend being lazy like a sloth?"

"Hmm… I mean, you're always so on edge, Mahiru. I thought some little relaxation time like this might help you unwind. Sometimes you don't let yourself relax even around me."

"B-But even so…"

"I tried to create an ambience that you'd enjoy. Was that too much of me?"

"N-No, it's not that…!"

“So it’s okay?”

“...What do you plan to do while I’m relaxing, Amane-kun?”

“That depends on you, I guess… If you don’t want me to see, then I’ll be in my room studying.”

“What if I don’t mind you seeing?”

“Then, maybe I’ll enjoy watching you let yourself succumb to relaxation.”

“…You won’t come and relax with me?” Mahiru glanced at Amane.

When she looked up at him with those eyes and asked that question, there was no way anyone in the world could refuse her request.

“If it’s okay with you, I’d love to.”

“You say that, but I know you planned as such from the beginning.”

“Yep. Is that not okay?”

“…Now you’re being straightforward—*and* cute.”

“Mahiru, your standards for being cute are beyond me. Well, I don’t mind not being cute.”

“…You are cute, but not at the same time.”

Slightly amused by Mahiru’s ambiguous words, Amane chuckled softly and, as prompted, settled into the ‘evil’ beanbag sofa that spoiled whoever fell into its clutches. Mahiru sat beside him…or so he had thought—instead, she plopped herself right between his legs and leaned back against him boldly.

Mahiru glanced back at Amane, who then blinked back in surprise. A mischievous smile played on her lips.

“…If the goal is to make me succumb to laziness, then I would rather do so by your hands, Amane-kun.”

Upon hearing a whisper so sweet, Amane not letting out a groan was almost short of a miracle. Mahiru, too, was well versed in how to act in ways that would make Amane fall.

“…You’re so cu—”

“Not cute enough for you?”

“…That was so cute that I’m concerned. Please worry about yourself first.”

“Why’s that?”

If you start teasing me like that, even my composure might take a hit, Amane thought with a sigh, wishing that she would be more careful. He wrapped his arms around her dainty body. Though she initially tensed with embarrassment, she quickly relaxed and entrusted herself to him completely. As he gently embraced her and they soaked in the soft sunlight, Mahiru's breathing soon settled into a slow, steady rhythm within his arms.

She must have been tired already, for Amane could see from above that her eyelids were already starting to drop.

"…So warm," she said.

"Me, or the sunlight?"

"Both. It feels very comforting."

"Yeah."

Amane felt immense joy hearing Mahiru's sleepy, tranquil voice and seeing her relaxed posture, which was a testament to her complete trust in him. Relishing the moment, he closed his eyes as well, letting the soft, warm spring sunlight lull him into peace.

…This is what happiness feels like.

Nestled comfortably in his arms, Mahiru had already begun to breathe softly, drifting off into sleep. Amane, feeling a warmth different from that of the spring sunlight, savored this moment of pure joy. Slowly, he let his thoughts drift into the sea of slumber, enveloped in the bliss of holding his beloved close.

Afterword

Author's Message

Thank you for picking up this book.

My name is Saeki-san, your author. I hope you enjoyed *The Angel Next Door*, Vol. 9.

Who could have expected consecutive birthday volumes? This release was all about Amane-kun running around, using trial and error in preparation for his beloved's birthday. When it's for Mahiru-san, Amane-kun never fails to go the extra mile.

Amane-kun is always willing to go above and beyond, but this time he gets a little help from his friends to plan her celebration. It's amazing how much his social circle has developed and how he's gained more people he can trust. I have nothing but admiration for him. If only we could show the Amane-kun from a year ago what he's up to now!

Now in the story, they've finally promised to live together. But Amane-kun *still* hasn't popped the question yet. *Yeesh, this guy.*

Amane-kun very naturally made the decision to spend his future with Mahiru-san, meanwhile *she's* the one who gets all flustered. But as long as Mahiru-san's happy, that's what really matters. Amane-kun has this way of casually promising a future together, and that really helps Mahiru-san feel secure. He's unknowingly a total Mahiru-san charmer!

And we also have Koyuki-san, who makes her first appearance in the main story (even though it's just through a screen). She's practically a stand-in parent for Mahiru and it would be no exaggeration to say that she has had

the greatest impact on shaping her personality. Koyuki-san always doted on Mahiru like her own child, so much so that she even considered taking Mahiru if anything were to happen. Now that Mahiru seems happy, Koyuki trusts Amane and leaves her in his care. But if anything bad happened, you can bet she'd come flying in to whisk Mahiru away. So, I can only hope Amane continues to make Mahiru happy going forward. Then again, both Mahiru and Amane are very rational people and are always willing to listen to each other, so I'm not particularly worried about any big misunderstandings or communication breakdowns between them.

With Koyuki making her main volume debut, I find myself even more tempted to write more chapters about Mahiru's childhood. There's something I really enjoy writing that subtle touch of darkness that seeps into a generally happy life. It makes for good contrast—it's like Mahiru's current happiness shines even brighter because of the struggles she has endured. Plus, I just really wanna see more illustrations of Mahiru as a child. Isn't the way Hanekoto-sensei draws young Mahiru just too adorable?

Speaking of Hanekoto-sensei, the illustrations in this volume are just fantastic! With the special edition, you get to see so many more colored illustrations, and honestly, I feel like I'm the one getting the best deal here. It's like a treasure trove of Mahiru illustrations… It's definitely the author who's benefiting the most. No doubt about it.

The cover art for the special edition and the colored insert illustrations in the regular edition each have their own unique style, and they're all just so adorable. I'm practically at a loss for words. Mahiru's expression on the cover, where she looks so overwhelmed with emotion, is just too precious. Well done, Amane-kun.

And I can't help but smile every time I see the little wing motifs included in the art. It's clear how much attention to detail went into these illustrations. I also really love the seasonal feel of the special edition cover. I'm a huge fan of how Hanekoto-sensei captures the different seasons, so this autumn-themed illustration really hits the spot for me.

This time, Koyuki-san finally makes an appearance in one of the colored insert illustrations, and wow, she's a real beauty... Hard to believe she's a grandmother, right? I'll keep her age a secret for the time being.

I hope to keep writing so that one day we can get an illustration of her meeting the other characters in person!

Finally, I'd like to express my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has supported this work.

To my editor, the GA Bunko editorial team, the sales team, the proofreaders, Hanekoto-sensei, the printing staff, and of course, to all of you who picked up this book, thank you ever so much.

I sincerely hope we can meet again in the next volume.

Thank you so much for reading all the way to the end!

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I hope you enjoyed. Fan translator, Indi writing.

Firstly, thank you very much for reading! While this volume has been a long time in the making (well, translating?), I believe that the result was definitely worthwhile.

I would like to thank ***Dil***, ***Trevor***, ***aritakun***, ***CN2025***, and ***Uzumi Kum*** for helping to provide the raws for the *Bookwalker*, *Gamers*, *Melon Books*, *Suruga-ya*, *Toranoana*, and *GA Bunko 2024 Spring Fair* short stories. As always, I would like to thank our accuracy checkers, ***Zel*** and ***Blank***, for helping me wrap my head around lines that just left me scratching my head. *Classic Saeki-san*. She always throws us curve balls when we least expect it. I would also like to thank ***SoTipsyy*** and ***existence is pain*** for proofreading, ***bzk*** for editing, and ***SecreFTL*** for helping me with the preliminary translation, speeding things up when I have been unavailable due to work or other personal reasons.

If you have enjoyed our translation, please consider giving them all a heartfelt message over at ***discord.gg/otonari***. Once again, thank you very

much for reading our fan translation!

Don't forget to support the series in other ways!

See the Fan Translator Page for the relevant hyperlinks, and please purchase the official English Translation by ***Yen Press*** once available in your country. As of this translation, they have English translations up to Volume 7, with Volume 8 set to release December 10th! I hope you will continue to enjoy this series!

Note: This fan translation is NOT for resale, nor should it serve as an alternative to purchasing the official translations in the future.